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Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Instruction in a Culture of Care

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Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Instruction in a Culture of Care

by

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A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

This capstone project was part of a group project completed by five school and district administrators in Hillsborough County, Florida. The project began because of our passion for teachers who are able to establish a culture of care in their classrooms that support students academically but transform their learning through experiences that enable them to be more highly engaged and productive students, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived academic abilities, and backgrounds.

Our school district has spent significant resources attempting to address the deficiencies that exist within its lower performing schools. A variety of curriculum specialists have addressed challenges these largely Title 1 schools are facing, with little to moderate improvement shown over the course of several years.

Selected literature over the past ten years was reviewed to gain insight into developments and discussions that have materialized around the notions of culturally relevant (curricular/pedagogical) leadership in schools. My component of this project was guided by the question: How is cultural diversity addressed in curriculum so as to be relevant to the success of traditionally marginalized students (students of color and/or those from communities of low socioeconomic status)?

Insights from the literature reviewed suggest that Appreciative Inquiry as a more holistic approach to cultural relevancy creates greater opportunity for deliberate and intentional building of relationships of respect and responsibility, giving rise to social consciousness and not just improved test performance.

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

This final project report was completed as part of a group project examining the concept of a ‘culture of care’. Turnaround schools are plagued by cycles of poor academic achievement and high referral and discipline rates. Barriers to success can include high levels of poverty, teacher apathy, low teacher retention, poor student achievement, and weak leadership. These barriers can be overcome and must be overcome if we are to truly turn schools around.

Our group believes that students at turnaround schools need the best teachers - teachers who care about them, believe in them, and will not give up on them. They need teachers who will understand where they are coming from and differentiate their learning experiences to meet their needs. They need teachers who understand that the culture and climate in their classrooms is just as important as the academic lessons being taught. We believe these “superstar” teachers exist—teachers who have high levels of student achievement and whose classrooms are warm, inviting communities for learning that support students academically but transform their learning through experiences that enable them to be more highly engaged and productive, regardless of students’ ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived academic abilities, and backgrounds.

Personal focus. This topic is extremely significant to me as a former high school principal at a Title 1 school. Prior to the beginning of the school year, our superintendent would call together a group of over 50 different supervisors and directors in the room, all asking questions about The school’s performance and decline from the year prior. This intimidating process would often render an instructional leader wondering if he was making the right choice at his school site, and I was no exception. Once the year began, I was inundated with bi-monthly meetings where the

district accountability team would meet at my site and engage in questioning for over two hours, always focusing on the areas that needed improvement and never examining areas of strength.

When I was promoted to a district curriculum position, I felt uneasy about the prospect of having to now lead discussions in a similar manner as the accountability facilitator. Once the new superintendent became official, he immediately began a focus on building a new culture that truly fostered support and stated that the current accountability process, built out of intimidation, would be done away with. I am now working with many of the originators of that process to modify how we deliver true instructional support for our school leaders.

Lately, there has been much conversation about how to prepare future leaders to understand and respond to diversity issues, with an emphasis on ensuring that students receive curricula in a manner that demonstrates equity and cultural consciousness. Standards-based curriculum can often become regimented when implemented within schools, in order to meet standardized testing competencies. Teachers may feel they can only offer limited support and scaffolding to students, as they are required to keep pace with the assessment-driven curriculum set for them.

Yet, some of the most powerful work suggests that when students become a “community of learners” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), where the teacher, school leaders, and district leaders adapt the curriculum for the students, allowing for authentic engagement, relevancy and understanding, students become genuinely active in the learning process and positive success ensues.

My focus in this group project was guided by the question, how is cultural diversity addressed in curriculum so as to be relevant to the success of traditionally marginalized students (students of color and/or those from communities of low socio-economic status)?

School District Context

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) currently serves over 210,000 students, with over 15,000 certified teachers and 25,000 full-time staff. HCPS is the eighth-largest school district in the country with over 250 schools. The enrollment by race/ethnicity is approximately 40% white, 29% Hispanic, 21% Black, and 3% Asian. Fifty-seven percent of all students are on free and reduced-priced lunch. Roughly 12% of all students are English Language Learners (ELL), and the district graduation rate for 2015 was 76% with over 14,000 students graduating.

Social service in the community. Hillsborough County, Florida has comprehensive social services. The Social Services Department provides comprehensive case management programs as well as stabilization services to low-income residents of Hillsborough County. Staff promote and support the educational process by meeting the individual needs of students and families within the community (see <http://www.sdhc.k12.fl.us/departments/63/social-work-services/about/>).

To better guide parents of HCPS students to community support services, Hillsborough County Schools have an entire Student Services Department which includes: Attendance, Exceptional Student Education (Special Education), Guidance Services, Health Services, Multi-Tiered System of Supports, Non-Traditional Programs K-12, Professional Development, Psychological Services, and Social Work Services.

School choice. HCPS School Choice provides parents and legal guardians with options such as Magnet schools, Career & Technical Education programs, School Choice (parents may choose from a list of schools with space available), Out of County options, and options for military families. School Choice has become increasingly popular in HCPS with several options available:

- *Charter schools* – independent public schools operated by a non-profit organization. According to a report printed February 29, 2016 by the HCPS Charter Office, 16,620 students are currently enrolled in Charter schools.
- *Home education* – defined by Florida Statute 1003.01 as "sequentially progressive instruction of a student directed by his or her parent in order to satisfy the attendance requirements of SS.1002.41, 1003.01 (4), and 1003.21 (1)."
- *John M. McKay Scholarship* – additional Choice options to students with an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan.
- *Partnership schools* – schools that have developed an innovative partnership between the public and private sector. Proof of employment in the partnership area is a requirement.
- *Hillsborough Virtual School (HVS)* – a school choice option for students entering grades K-12. HVS students are served by Highly Qualified Hillsborough County teachers for each class online.

Turnaround Schools

Our group's sense of the need for a *culture of care* in our schools and classrooms came from our observations of a historical and prevailing misconception in our society that many of our most poverty stricken and underperforming students cannot learn. This mentality of inability pervades our educational world and includes a subversive belief which asserts that it is okay to allow students of color and low socio-economic status to fail. It was our group's profound sense of purpose that drove our discussion to delve deeper into the context of how care, compassion, and commitment to our students might truly thwart the ills that society has constructed and allow *all* students, in *all* schools to succeed.

We derived this concept of a *culture of care* from a variety of combined resources. Utilizing the newly formulated “HCPS Octagon” that represents the eight essential tenets of a culturally positive organization, as well as embracing the Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s) that our district leaders outlined as priorities, our team formulated the notion that care pervaded and necessitated all these initiatives. Furthermore, our perspective was informed by an extensive exposure to a variety of educational reform literature that discussed the “ethic of care” and “building relationships,” along with “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Gorski, 2013; Guajardo & Guajardo with Casaperalta, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). In addition, “appreciative organizing in education” (Barrett & Fry, 2008; Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) helped us to conceptualize the need for defining, understating, and realizing that a *culture of care* in our schools and with our teachers, administrators, and most importantly students, is necessary.

The notion of “culturally appropriate” (Au & Jordan, 1981, p. 139) pedagogy began over 35 years ago and suggested that teachers in a Hawaiian school incorporate aspects of students’ cultural backgrounds into their reading instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). However, today’s context magnifies the importance of providing culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995) instruction and curriculum for our students of other backgrounds, creating a sense of purpose for our black and brown children and allowing them to be reflected in the body of work that is read and studied in schools. By truly allowing our traditionally underrepresented ethnic groups the opportunity to study literature and engage in resources that mirror their population in schools, we can emphasize just how untrue the idea is that Black people don’t value education (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Moreover, as HCPS administrators and researchers, we are committed to overcoming the institutional limitations that disproportionately affect our low income students. Despite the literature that suggests schools cannot overcome the societal barriers that students bring with them every day (Berliner & Glass, 2014), we were convinced that there are teachers who are capable of excellent teaching for all struggling students (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

SECTION 2. PERSPECTIVES FROM SELECTED LITERATURE

Lately, there has been much conversation about how to prepare future leaders to understand and respond to diversity issues, with an emphasis on ensuring that students receive the curricula in a manner that demonstrates equity and cultural consciousness. Furthermore, there is a growing expectation that schools have a responsibility to generate social consciousness within students, exceeding the previous expectation of solely focusing on academic success.

However, some in leadership positions respond to Common Core or Florida Standards by often regimenting curricula when implemented within schools, leaving many teachers feeling they can only offer limited support and scaffolding to students, as they are required to keep pace with the teaching timeline set for them. Conversely, some of the most powerful work suggests that when students instead become a “community of learners” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), where the teacher, school leaders, and district leaders adapt the curriculum for the students, allowing for authentic engagement, relevancy and understanding), students become genuinely active in the learning process and positive success ensues.

The purpose of this review of selected literature over the past ten years is to discover developments and discussions that have materialized around notions of culturally relevant (curricular/pedagogical) leadership in professional development (PD) in schools with respect to diversity. This review guided by the question, how is cultural diversity addressed in curriculum so as to be relevant to the success of traditionally marginalized students (students of color and/or those from communities of low socio-economic status)?

Methods used to conduct the review. Literature reviewed from the past ten years focused on culturally responsive pedagogy (instruction) or curriculum, but with an emphasis on how this translates into caring behavior impressed upon the students. Over 20 journal articles were reviewed. Approximately eight were qualitative studies, four used mixed methods, and eight offered a discussion of texts (i.e., literature review, review of research). Key words used to search databased in the University of South Florida Libraries were school culture, fragmentation, culturally relevant curriculum, culturally relevant leadership, appreciative inquiry, and appreciative organizing.

Of particular interest were articles that moved beyond teachers and leaders understanding cultural awareness toward cultural responsiveness, where students of color are provided with different perspectives and opportunities to further their empowerment and voice. International articles were excluded because they were written about homogeneous populations that did not mirror the demographics of the United States. Additionally, there were several pieces of literature that focused on how cultural relevance may decrease the incidence of drug abuse and other health related effects, and these were also omitted.

Four themes emerged from this review: (1) culturally relevant pedagogy and caring behavior, (2) culturally relevant leadership and relationships, (3) teacher-student relationships, and (4) student empowerment and ownership.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Caring Behavior

There were eight qualitative studies or interviews that addressed the connection between culturally relevant pedagogy and caring behavior, whether stated explicitly or not. They forwarded a common understanding that the actions of school leaders and teachers have a profound impact (Guajardo, M., Guajardo F., with Casaperalta, 2008; Garza, 2009; Goughnour, 2013; Milner, 2010,

2014; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015; Ware, 2006; Wyatt, 2014). There is an expectation that in order to perpetuate positive change, school leaders must understand these complexities and respond appropriately.

The four mixed methods studies (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Roberts, 2010; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2010; Savage et al., 2011) also examined the relationship of culturally relevant practices and the outcome for students, with quantitative components that demonstrated the effectiveness of culturally relevant curriculum on student outcomes. The remaining eight studies, comprised of either a discussion of texts, focus groups or interviews, further elaborated the imperative of strong professional development for school leaders to remain culturally relevant and competent, the relationships and demonstrations of care that teachers and school leaders must foster to create positive results, or the importance of empowering students to take ownership of their own learning, becoming academic activists of change (Azano, 2014; Blachowicz et al., 2010; Harris & Kiyama, 2013; Hernandez & Marshall, 2008; Johnson, 2014; Rodriguez, 2010; Smith, 2005).

As educators and school and district leaders, an understanding that culturally relevant pedagogy may be expressed through how teachers care for students, regardless of what they teach, is arising. Whether this concept is expressed in the no-nonsense, structured classroom that demonstrates a sense of care to African-Americans as ‘warm-demanders’ (Ware, 2006, p. 436), a relationship of ‘confianza’ (Harris & Kiyama, 2013), or the use of multicultural literature that expands a child’s educational opportunity to the highest potential (Goughnour, 2013), all of the literature demands that students be exposed to a diverse repertoire of work that harnesses positive relationships and where student thought is pronounced.

Culturally Relevant Leadership and Relationships

The authors addressing culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum over the past 10 years often begin by asserting that without cultural competence in leadership, very little can be done to overcome the struggles students endure. Smith (2005) explains that because White students are inherently privileged through society, a culturally conscious leader utilizes professional development and training to overcome the assumptions of “institutionalized knowledge within schools” and provide students with “academic and social success” (p. 28). This implies that culturally competent leadership opens the door for a deeper discussion of how then these leaders employ the right teachers, who represent the diverse group of learners they have at the school site (Ware, 2006). Moreover, there is also a suggestion that it is only with a more diverse and representative leadership applicant pool that districts will harness leaders who are sensitive to the needs of all student’s cultural backgrounds (Johnson, 2014).

It is fundamental to understand the connection between cultural competence and relationships, as Milner (2010) describes in his qualitative study of a white science teacher, who through his culturally relevant understanding of students of color is able to generate authentic interaction and productive learning. The assertion is made that without the strong student/teacher relationship, as discussed in the next section, little progress would ensue. Culturally competent leaders develop “confianza” or “mutual trust” (Harris & Kiyama, 2013, p. 186) with students, which is perpetuated upon the holistic value that is placed upon previously marginalized students, again based on established relationships (Harris & Kiyama, 2013), making the process of selecting the right leaders extremely important.

Teacher – Student Relationships

How administrators empower teachers to build relationships with the students and families so they can develop a sense of cultural importance in the work they are creating is crucial (Guajardo, M., Guajardo F., with Casaperalta, 2008). This work suggests that part of the relationship building comes from allowing educators the opportunity to explore multi-culturally appropriate education (Blachowicz et al, 2010) and challenge student thinking in a more relevant way that is “critically engaging, inquiry-based and intellectually meaningful” (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 926). This innovative practice of engaging in the critical perspective and discussing social justice, by empowering students to explore work they were interested in (Guajardo et al., 2008; Rodriguez, 2010), was not elaborated upon until several years later when educators considered relinquishing control over the curriculum and focusing on student choice.

Initially, academicians indicated that if the material is relate-able and connected to the students who are addressed, the context does not matter. Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2010) explore a host of stereotypical minority-centered literature that focuses on largely underrepresented people and tout these selections as making a substantial difference to the students’ overall outcomes and success. While arguable, this focus on African American literature is a departure from the previous all white, European score of work. These options leave many students and critics wondering where their true purpose and passion are, with an imposition that requires an extremely culturally savvy teacher as part of the solution, and all without student choice or voice.

Moreover, the scholars also further explore how providing this culturally responsive pedagogy is in many ways seen as an act of caring behavior (Roberts, 2010), perhaps rarely associated with traditional definitions of teacher care and compassion. It is through the reference

of “culturally relevant critical teacher care (CRCTC)” that school leaders begin to see how the ethic of care can be considered part of the curriculum, albeit perhaps the hidden or null curriculum (Roberts, 2010, p. 451). This theoretical construct suggests that we must treat our students of color differently (Vega, Moore & Miranda, 2015), including essentials like code switching and counter narratives, in order to remain successful and relevant in schools (Roberts, 2010). While these notions harken back to Ware’s (2006) reference to “warm demanders” for teachers of color, exploring the impact that black teachers have on black students, specific to academic achievement and culturally specific behaviors, Roberts’ assertions are simply a theoretical framework that cannot translate into specific behaviors that all teachers and students can enact or benefit from, respectively, thus leaving us with the continued dilemma of needing more highly qualified teachers of color for our minority students and again being left with a shortage.

Student Empowerment and Ownership

The most recent literature suggests the importance of students truly taking ownership of their learning, not only supporting the literature defined by the teachers, whether they be culturally competent educators or teachers of color. Ironically, it is Milner (2014) who readdresses the complexity of culturally relevant pedagogy and asks “what [the student] role is in creating a truly democratic and multicultural society,” reverting back to Ladson-Billings statement that culturally relevant pedagogy addresses “not only academic success, but also social and cultural success” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 110), stressing that the context does indeed matter.

Prominent is the idea that students must be able to connect to their own learning by feeling empowered through their own voice, around issues relating to their community (Guajardo & Guajardo, with Casaperalta, 2008). When students have the ability to introspectively assess themselves and see their work as “academic activism” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2016), they are able

to more meaningfully connect to the learning environment and subsequently become more academically successful. According to Guajardo & Guajardo, with Casaperalta (2008), without a strong relationship with students who are of different cultures, teachers will be unable to impact positive change. In Milner (2014) a teacher, Mrs. Shaw, feels committed to “serve” her students, by bringing about “change” through their [students] “calling in life” (p. 12). Moreover, Guajardo & Guajardo (with Casaperalta, 2008) describes how Carmen developed into an “activist-researcher” and became empowered to understand her own cultural background and significance in such a manner that she seeks knowledge and a manner to apply the knowledge she has gained for herself, but also for the greater good of the community.

This transition to providing “empowerment through care” through a “commitment and connection to the larger community” (Johnson, 2014, p. 148) begins to shed light on the prospect that not only does a culturally relevant context provide an authentic way for students to fundamentally relate to their own learning and become more engaged, but it also helps to overcome the deficit model of thinking and demonstrates that our traditionally underrepresented students have valuable resources to share, specifically through their community stories (Guajardo & Guajardo, with Casaperalta, 2008; Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015).

The broader connection and implication proclaims that culturally responsive pedagogy includes leadership for social justice, connecting boldly to the work of Guajardo, but also to how many distract leaders and school principals are approaching diversity and school reform at present (Johnson, 2014). While training is imperative to promote more diverse thinking and exploration, it is no longer enough to just expect this culturally responsive mindset to trickle down to teachers and students, through professional development alone. The prospect of change will only be manifested when a grassroots campaign of student academic activism seizes influence upon the

way curriculum is designed and narratives of community leaders and other elders, who helped shape the communities our students are from, are collected, seeking true collaboration with parents and community advocates (Johnson, 2014). It is only through this critical student lens that this mind-shift in the prominence of social justice preparing students for the reality of life and its challenges will ensue (Azano, 2014), thus truly providing a culturally caring environment that addresses all backgrounds and all students.

Summary

Over the past ten years our understanding of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy has evolved. Initially, the focus was on the idea that with better professional development and the right training, school leaders will become more aware and focused on culturally relevant teaching. Additionally, there have been increasing discussions about how poor relationships with students, effectively rendered teachers powerless in their ability to impact positive change and success. Most recently, are calls to empower students, regardless of their cultural background, to become “academic activists” in their own community and with regard to their own localized issues, allowing them to make their own learning more meaningful and purposeful. This more holistic approach synthesizes the work of previous scholars, suggesting that “care” is demonstrated by a deliberate and intentional understanding of all cultures, a sincere relationship of respect and responsibility between the student and the teacher, and an authentic voice and perspective afforded to students, allowing them to have ownership in the “great work” that matters to them (Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015), giving rise to social consciousness and not just test performance.

SECTION 3. PROJECT REPORT

Appreciative Inquiry and Organizing (AOE) is a theoretical approach (Barrett & Fry, 2008; Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) that allows individuals to reject the deficit model and harness “students’ cultural strengths” into the learning environment and organizational design (Azano, 2014, p. 62).

Instead of teaching the “decontextualized stuff” (Theobald, 1997), education might instead attend to context and offer “place conscious instruction” (Azano, 2014, p. 62) to provide students with an opportunity to take ownership in their own learning. In addition to context is the concept of culture in teaching and learning, from *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 2009) to *culturally responsive teaching* (Gay, 2010) or *funds of knowledge* (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). All set the stage to identify assets and resources within our marginalized students, families, and communities, providing them hope, instead of assuming our struggling students are a burden and liability (Guajardo et al., 2008; Trueba, 1999; Wyatt, 2014) as in the traditional problem-solving, deficit model.

Appreciative Inquiry, then, is based on the assumption that finding what works right in an organization helps it focus on what is important, effective, and successful. Focusing on this positive core helps an organization think about ways to sharpen its vision, leverage its energy, and take action for change. It is strengths-based rather than deficit thinking.

Project Purpose

Our purpose in this project was not to replicate the successes of other districts or schools, but rather to uncover aspects and behaviors of a culture of care that support systems that overcome

performance and equity gaps. We did not expect to have a cure-all that would immediately address gaps in achievement. Rather, by combining the approach of focusing on teacher-driven, practitioner-based successes, along with theoretical researched-based knowledge, we felt we might gain insight into the “complex nature of education[al] limits” that Berliner and Glass (2015) refer to in “Trust But Verify” -- limits which often leave individuals dumbfounded by complexities that at times seem inherently counter-intuitive.

Individual Focus. Much of the literature on school reform focuses on the notion that students must be able to connect to their own learning by feeling empowered through their own voices around issues relating to their community. When students have the ability to introspectively assess themselves, they are able to more meaningfully connect to the learning environment and subsequently become more academically successful.

Lately, there has been much conversation about how to prepare future leaders to understand and respond to diversity issues, with an emphasis on ensuring that students receive curricula in a manner that demonstrates equity and cultural consciousness. Standards-based curriculum can often become regimented when implemented within schools, in order to meet standardized testing competencies. Teachers may feel they can only offer limited support and scaffolding to students, as they are required to keep pace with the assessment-driven curriculum set for them.

Yet, some of the most powerful work suggests that when students become a “community of learners” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), where the teacher, school leaders, and district leaders adapt the curriculum for the students, allowing for authentic engagement, relevancy and understanding, students become genuinely active in the learning process and positive success ensues. My focus was guided by the question, how is cultural diversity addressed in curriculum so as to be relevant

to the success of traditionally marginalized students (students of color and/or those from communities of low socio-economic status)?

Expectations for Cultural Relevancy

The Charlotte Danielson Framework for Teaching (2007) guides how HCPS defines effective teaching and evaluates a teacher’s performance. The framework consists of four Domains: Domain 1 Planning and Preparation; Domain 2 Classroom Environment; Domain 3 Instruction; and Domain 4 Professional Responsibilities.

Three components could be considered a proxy measure for teachers’ ability to create a culture of care in their classrooms: 1B Demonstrating Knowledge of Students in Domain 1, 2A Environment of Respect and Rapport, and 2B Culture for Learning in Domain 2. Table 1 shows the percentage of teachers in the district achieving ratings on the district’s evaluation continuum of Required Action, Progressing, Accomplished, and Exemplary. Data indicate that 16.6% of

Table 1

Summary of Percentage of Teachers Achieving Ratings on the Evaluation Continuum in 2014-2015 (n=12,671)

| Danielson Rubric Component | Required Action Rating | Progressing Rating | Accomplished Ratings | Exemplary Ratings | Not Observed |
|--|------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| 1B. Demonstrating Knowledge of Students | 0.3% | 16.6% | 77.7% | 5.4% | 0.1% |
| 2A. Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport | 0.4% | 5.1% | 88.3% | 6.2% | 0.0% |
| 2B. Establishing a Culture for Learning | 0.6% | 25.6% | 67.4% | 6.4% | 0.0% |

Data Source: Hillsborough County Public Schools, Office of Assessment and Accountability

teachers in HCPS received Progressing ratings in 1B Demonstrating Knowledge of Students, 5.1% in 2A. Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport, and 25.6% in 2B. Establishing a Culture for Learning. Roberts (2010) indicates that culturally relevant teachers build caring student-teacher relationships. Teachers receiving Accomplished ratings (88.3%) in 2A Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport might appear to build such relationships.

Culturally sensitive teaching, however, is also based on teachers' knowledge of students and their needs. It would appear from the data that teachers have growth opportunities in the areas of demonstrating knowledge of students (16.6% with Progressing ratings) and establishing a culture for learning (25.6% with Progressing ratings).

Other aspects of culturally sensitive and culturally relevant teaching are not assessed in the district's current evaluation model, e.g., celebration of differences and equity, student voice, and student empowerment and ownership of their learning (Guajardo & Guajardo, with Casaperalta, 2008).

Differentiated Support in Turnaround Schools

The district has allocated significant resources to its struggling schools, with the greatest need schools called STARR schools (Students, Teachers, and Administrators Receiving Resources). Over the past five years in the Curriculum and Instruction-Secondary Education Division, there had been a total of about nine schools that have generally performed in the bottom third tier in state-wide assessments, including the state Comprehensive Assessment Test and more recently the End-of-Course Assessments (EOC) in courses like: Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II, Biology, and U.S. History. The resources provided have generally consisted of either bi-monthly or monthly support meetings, depending on status rating, with a variety of district personnel

representing Secondary Education, including directors, content supervisors, and academic coaches in certain courses.

The general purpose of these meetings was to review the plan of action from the previous meeting, determine the level of implementation, and review the subsequent student performance data. Unfortunately, while extremely pertinent to the issues occurring at the school, the platform used at these meetings was generally derived from a deficit model or problem-solving approach, often attempting to analyze concerns and immediate areas of need, in isolation and not as a systemic network. This fragmentation (Barrett & Fry, 2008) seldom left school administrators with positive sentiment and solutions, and instead created anxiety from the scrutiny and expectation that the principal and assistant principal for curriculum bore the responsibility for ensuring the positive changes occurred.

Reflection on process. The yearly process typically began with a formal meeting with an abundance of district personnel on-hand to echo the superintendent's significant concerns and ensure that the principal would work with the support that was given to assist these struggling schools. The principal attended this initial meeting alone and was expected to explain the reason for poor results in whichever areas were deficient, accepting that he was to embrace the resources given, whether they were necessary, useful, thoughtful and/or implementable, or risk being moved from that school by the superintendent.

Personnel issues were frequently brought up as areas of concern at these meetings and a representative from human resources was most often present to either defend the principal's hiring actions or question the status of terminating poorly evaluated employees. Rarely were any long-term resolutions generated from these meetings that would help elevate the quality of applicants or assist in filling vacancies that sometimes extended throughout the school year. Furthermore,

many of these schools were also asked to review and defend their plan to improve graduation rate (federal and at-risk), post-secondary readiness (SAT & ACT scores) and acceleration participation and performance (IB, AP, and CTE exams), despite whether these scores were improved, sustained, or simply inconsequential.

Moreover, rarely were any of the human factors interjected into the discourse at these meetings. Statements of frustration about the inundating and ongoing school-wide and classroom discipline infractions that often preempted any academic achievement, usually serious in nature, involving weapons and guns and serious fights, were largely looked at as working conditions. Much of the conversation was focused around the next upcoming assessment and the temporary adjustments or recommendations that could be put in place prior to the next test to maximize student performance. Many of these suggestions were based on what had been done at other schools and thought of as well-intentioned ideas that could possibly be replicated. Too often the school leader was being asked to explain at these site-based meetings what the plan was to aid in improving student achievement, as they examined the most recent formative student data across various disciplines. Unfortunately, most of the school leaders felt extremely frustrated that with all the blame and expectation levied upon them, compounded with few true resources provided to deal with all these concerns, little would be accomplished, especially as a last minute reaction. The prevailing sentiment from these school principals was that of hopelessness, and instead of receiving useful support or strategies, the district was micro-managing and scrutinizing school-based decisions, with little or no level of autonomy or support.

Change in leadership. The district recently underwent a superintendent change, along with a philosophical change in perspective about school culture. The new superintendent

emphasizes relationships, in that the relationships we build define our way of working, which ultimately determines the success of the organization.

Perspectives from Appreciative Inquiry and Organizing

As the facilitator of a data discussion, the relational district spokesperson should harness “positive interactions that will encourage personal development” (Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015, p. 69). By modeling the practice of asking thoughtful and purposeful questions, the district leader would recognize that the best answers may not come at this table, but with time and a thoughtful approach to understanding. The act of questioning very often “brings out the best in a person, a situation, or an organization” (Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015, p. 69). Asking the right purposeful questions to make the familiar strange allows school leaders to begin to reculturize the community and organization (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2016). Furthermore, as relational leaders, we “must change [our] way of asking questions” (Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015, p. 64) because they significantly impact the direction of the work and the organization.

From an appreciative stance, school leaders should “utilize tools to build a transparent and inclusive environment where exploration and growth are encouraged and expected” (Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015, p.64). Closing the achievement gap is not about dictating procedures, replicating results and copying systems that worked at other schools. Focusing only on the negative rarely fixes anything in a sustainable way.

If we considered these perspectives from appreciative inquiry and organizing, what would an approach to differentiated support for our lowest achievement schools look like? A support plan might include the following:

- Focus on building relationships with school leaders to establish trust.

- Operate in conjunction with the “principal coach” as an “academic coach/consultant” to discuss strengths and strategies.
- Share powerful and inspirational stories to enhance collaborative value.
- Invite Principals and Assistant Principals for Curriculum to share their strengths and ideal vision (desired future) for their schools.
- Ask them how they can leverage effective resources to continue growth and overcome challenging areas (building capacity, not deficit thinking), knowing the superintendent’s vision of “preparing students for life.”
- Identify social capital in the community that can support the school and learning.
- Seek school-based leaders’ input to design a support network that is fluid and accommodating:
 - Consider only meeting with content supervisor and coaches in requested or needed areas (based on performance/gains, new leadership, vacancies, etc.).
 - Consider informal meetings and focusing on quality instructional candidates through HR.
 - Provide opportunities for principal’s insight, direction and participation.
 - Allow coaches (site and on the ground) to design and implement ideas.
 - Provide ongoing conversations and observe the effective practices happening at the site.
 - Allow the supervisors or coaches to lead the conversations about the positive changes occurring since the last meeting.
- Sort the schools into similarly defined demographic categories in order to better measure areas of success.

- Seek input/stories from these similar demographically defined schools in areas of success and discuss transferability of ideas.

An appreciative inquiry and organizing perspective supports a generative approach where school leaders view “processes and capacities” (Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015, p. 43) in a new way. Barrett and Fry (2008) observe that “how we live our life is a function of where we put our collective thoughts” (p. 41). As districts and schools begin to utilize Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results (SOAR) instead of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT), we can begin to make “progressive interactions” (Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015, p. 49) that allow us to look beyond the “what’s wrong” (Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015, p. 55) and focus on individuals who can “lead continual change, capacity building and sustainability” (Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015, p. 55).

Summary

Creating a culture of care within schools and school districts is not only possible, but extremely beneficial. Strategizing change from a “growth mindset” is critical to generating opportunity and creating space for truly equitable work, focused around students. The greatest need in the district lies in the area of student experiences and possibility. To realize culturally relevant teaching and curriculum, we as educators have to challenge our notions of what kids can and cannot do. We forget to celebrate their successes, promote their thinking, and awaken their confirmation of their capability and resources. We must stop looking for reasons of why not, and focus instead on purposefully seeking possibilities. When our students take hold of their own learning in true culturally rich environments, they can become advocates of their own learning and for personal excellence.

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