

Recognizing the Cultural Value students bring to school

Students of color are often seen through a deficit thinking lens, rather than appreciated for the wealth of cultural knowledge, skills and abilities they possess.

Our mother was quite ill and died when my brother was 10 and I was 4. Our “*tías*” (aunts) raised us much of our early childhood years until our father remarried. My *Tía* Annie and *Tía* Fadi provided valuable cultural memories that to this day produce a smile. Though both aunts have since died, the smell of freshly made *tortillas* floats through the air each time their names are mentioned – fresh *tortillas* hot off the griddle, slathered with butter and eaten enthusiastically. It seems like yesterday the butter made its way down the length of my arm, only to end up as a stain on my pants.

As author Octavio Paz reminds us, “Life is plurality, death is uniformity. Every view that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life” (Pine & Hilliard, 1990).

The memories described above are part and parcel of my cultural memories and cultural value. Until I wrote these words they were part of my oral tradition only. My children and grandchildren have heard the

stories of how “poppy” earned the shape of his body by enjoying *tortillas*, *chorizo y papas*, and *frijoles*. It is these cultural memories and the cultural value of a majority of today’s students that must be acknowledged and celebrated today and in the future.

What students bring to school

Years of serving as an educational leader provided me with an opportunity to observe what transpires in classrooms and school sites from the preschool level to university doctoral programs.

I began my career as a middle school teacher in California’s central valley and eventually served in various districts throughout California as a high school teacher, coach and guidance counselor, elementary school principal, middle school assistant principal and principal, and now associate professor and department chair at a major university. As a result of these expe-

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riences, I am convinced that our academic efforts from preschool through higher education must include the recognition and institutionalization of the cultural memories and value that students arrive with daily.

A local educational leader once stated to my university class that attempting to meet the needs of all students by addressing academics only “is like planting seeds on concrete.”

In her influential work on community cultural wealth, “Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth” (2005), Tara Yosso conveys an important point that all educators, and especially school leaders, should recognize: All students bring cultural value to school.

Yosso points out that too often, students from communities of color are seen by educators through a “deficit thinking lens” instead of recognizing and learning from the “array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged.”

As Yosso writes and as I repeatedly remind students in my university classes, “Recognizing cultural value will help change the deficit manner in which students are often viewed and responded to, and in turn, will not only positively affect student achievement but also decrease the amount of unnecessary discipline taking place in schools.”

Valencia (2010) writes that the “deficit thinking model, at its core, is an endogenous theory – positing that the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies. Such deficits manifest, adherents allege, in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior.”

Leveraging students' cultural capital

It is imperative that there be a paradigm shift from deficit thinking to leveraging capital from the social and cultural communities of our students, in order to not only close the achievement and discipline gaps, but to eliminate both.

Franco, Ott & Robles (2011) write, “Educational transformation can only occur

when individuals and institutions representing multiple perspectives and experiences stop blaming underserved groups and, instead, embrace the education of underserved students as societal struggles and commit to doing whatever it takes to bring balance to systems where some demographic groups are systematically and disproportionately



preempted from opportunities for success.”

Though it is increasingly accurate that today’s student looks and perhaps speaks a different language than the majority of teachers and administrators, it is also true that the cultural memories and cultural value of students in California schools must become part of that which is taught and celebrated on a daily basis as part of a school’s curriculum. To not do so is to miss an opportunity to develop a healthy and inclusive school culture that builds resilient and respectful relationships.

In her award-winning book, “Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice,” author Geneva Gay defines culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2000).

Further developing culturally responsive pedagogy as an integral component in education is vitally important if school and teacher leaders are ever to move beyond solely attempting to close the academic achievement

gap. Instead, leaders must reach to close the racial achievement, opportunity and acknowledgment gaps through recognizing and celebrating cultural value on the road to cultural proficiency.

Personal experience as a student, teacher, counselor and administrator has served to solidify my premise that recognizing and

celebrating the cultures students bring to school will develop positive and healthy relationships between students, teachers and administrators. Doing so will provide the opportunity to change a school’s culture from emphasizing deficit thinking toward one focusing on the positive – a strength-based and asset-rich learning and teaching culture.

Students do not arrive at school with an empty slate; they bring cultural value with them. Listen to their voices, listen to their stories and celebrate them.

Meaningfully addressing the issues of race, culture, class and equity

Every summer for the last few years I have taught a class titled Theories of Cross-Cultural Education to students enrolled in the educational leadership program at California State University, Fresno. For most of the students, already leaders at their schools and organizations, this is often the first time that they have been called upon to meaningfully address the issues of race, culture, class and equity.

One of my doctoral students recently

said, “Recognizing the value that cultural capital plays in addressing inequities is paramount if as educators we want to continue making a greater impact.”

An interesting phenomenon occurs during class discussions on culture. Students of color, primarily Latino, Hmong and African-American students, have myriad stories to share about their culture, while white students are often frustrated and respond by saying, “I don’t have a culture.” It is my premise that it is just this thought pattern regarding culture that exemplifies and seems to trouble many of our future teachers and leaders.

Finding mutual identities

The inability of leaders to recognize their own culture often causes them to shut down, after which they are unable or unwilling to recognize the value of other cultures in classrooms, schools and school districts. It is at this point in the class that we begin the journey, together, to find mutual cultural identities that can be recognized and celebrated.

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Certainly, the road toward increased cultural understanding may be difficult to traverse. However, there is no choice. Issues of race, culture, class and equity will not disappear simply because we fail to discuss them. School and district leaders must become both culturally proficient and courageous.

Lindsey, Nuri-Robins and Terrell (2009) described culturally proficient leaders as those who “display personal values and behaviors that enable them and others to engage in effective interactions among students, educators, and the community they

serve... Culturally proficient leaders address issues that emerge when cultural differences are not valued in schools and other organizations.”

Organizational theorist Russell Ackoff (2006) noted correctly that “the only thing harder than starting something new is stopping something old.” The old way of thinking regarding the recognition of culture can no longer continue. Increasingly, student and community demographics in the state and nation are changing, and courageous conversations about culture must take place.

A new day is dawning, and today’s leaders must be the culturally proficient models for the students of our schools...our children and grandchildren. ■

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