

Understanding and Practicing Cultural Competence in Helping Youth Thrive

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The Cultural Disconnect between Educators and Youth

Youth who have been historically deemed as “at-risk” or full of deficiencies and even labeled liabilities can demonstrate that they are in fact “at-opportunity” and full of assets even capable of becoming agents of change if engaged in culturally competent ways. Noguera (2008) suggests that academic achievement of students of color can be predicted by the level of culturally responsive pedagogy that their teachers use. This topic of cultural competence and relevant engagement is particularly salient in U.S. public schools today where, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (McFarland et al., 2018) analysis of data, suggests that over 82.5% of teachers are white while more than 50.3% are students of color. This racial and cultural disparity between educators and youth is also reflected in a variety of youth development and health service fields (Betancourt, Green, Carrillo, & Park, 2005). While efforts have been taken to increase and diversify educators and staff across sectors, additional efforts in fostering cultural competence in individuals and organizations are needed to ensure the needs of youth and their families from diverse backgrounds are being effectively met.

Ladson-Billings (1994) defines cultural competence in education as the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while also gaining knowledge of or fluency in at least one other culture. The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition defines the term “Culture” as shared patterns of behavior and interactions, cognitive constructs, and understandings that are learned by socialization (Zimmerman, 2017). Culture goes beyond practices and values influenced by race or ethnicity and can include characteristics such as age, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, geographical location, education, profession, or religion. Culture is influenced by numerous factors such as race, class, and gender and must always be contextualized within a social construct. Thus, keeping these diverse characteristics in mind, cultural competence is an ongoing practice as opposed to finite accomplishment. Culturally responsive or relevant teaching is pedagogy where educators display cultural competence in teaching in a multicultural or cross-cultural setting (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). This approach enables each student to connect course content to his or her cultural context. Further, Paris and Alim (2017) describe *culturally sustaining pedagogies* in education as a process to sustain different cultural ways of being, teaching students to be resilient and to persevere, and to empower youth to accept and honor their cultural backgrounds. Overall, the process of developing cultural competence is also an evolving, dynamic process that takes time and applies to educators and organizations, just as it does to individuals and cohorts of students.

Whether in social service, educational, or out-of-school institutions, culturally competent institutions require a willingness to listen to and learn from members of other cultures. Cultural competence as exhibited in institutions shares information and services in appropriate languages, at appropriate literacy levels, with respect to the context of the individual and collective cultural beliefs and practices of those being served (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Betancourt et al., 2016), a culturally competent organization (1) engages in practices that continually assess organizational diversity; (2) invests in building capacity for cultural competency and inclusion; (3) practices strategic planning that incorporates community culture and diversity; (4) implements strategies using culture and diversity as a resource; and (5) assesses and evaluates the incorporation of cultural competence continuously. For the purposes of this chapter, we will share a framework for thriving that includes a culturally relevant application that we have developed from our collective praxis in schools, out-of-school programs, and engagement with communities. As researchers and practitioners, it is important that we demonstrate how culturally competent efforts to support thriving can play out pedagogically in classrooms, through community programs, and in strategic plans that include youth and families from diverse backgrounds in decision-making.

A special focus will be taken to examine these efforts in light of the realities of inequitable outcomes for these populations in areas of health, education, and well-being. The review of literature and the case studies that follow confront issues of institutional racism and systemic oppression while also highlighting impediments to well-being that can be overcome by cultural competence. Finally, we will offer examples of how educators, students, and communities can mobilize assets and cultural capital to promote cultural resilience, empowerment, and improve individual and collective forms of well-being.

Redefining Youth Engagement and Thriving: From Deficits to an Asset Perspective

Many social science scholars and practitioners believe that prevention and intervention programs designed to engage youth from diverse backgrounds are ineffective because these methods are overly focused on remediating student “deficits” rather than promoting student assets (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000; Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003). Others have argued that instead of seeing youth as problems needing to be “fixed,” youth should be viewed as asset-rich agents capable of making positive change (Ginwright & James, 2002; Pittman & Fleming, 1991). They called for the adoption of a positive youth development (PYD) model for working with youth that stops asking “what is wrong” with them and starts asking, “what is right” with them? This movement introducing positive psychology into school and after-school programs through a positive youth development framework was further developed as researchers documented how the promotion of youth “assets” increased student academic achievement, improved physical and emotional well-being, and subsequently decreased risky behaviors (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011).

Through the research of scholars at the Search Institute, 40 developmental assets were identified as contributing to the thriving of youth on both proximal outcomes during the course of adolescence as well as more distal outcomes of early adulthood (Scales & Leffert, 1999). From these 40 internal and external assets, 7 thriving indicators emerged which included: (1) leadership, (2) school success, (3) helping others, (4) maintenance of physical health, (5) delay of gratification, (6) valuing diversity, and (7) overcoming adversity. The work was developed further by Scales, Benson, and Roehlkepartain’s (2011) study, which suggested that adolescent thriving could be connected to three essential strengths. These three strengths were: (1) relationships with adults other than parents; (2) the presence of Sparks, strengths, or interests; and (3) having a Voice or an ability to contribute to the things that matter to them. Their research suggests that youth who have all three of these strengths do better on every academic, social and emotional, psychological, and behavioral outcome that they have studied. However,

their findings with a national sample of 1,817 youths (representative of youth from all demographics in the United States) suggest that less than 10% of 15-year-old youth score high on all three strengths. These efforts of engaging youth, particularly youth of color, in strength-based ways is a great start, and can be enhanced by including culturally competent and relevant ways of engaging youth.

Toward this end, Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) have argued for a theory of Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) that combines a strength-based approach with the impetus for cultural relevance and emergence of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is a term that originates from the work of Paulo Freire and da Veiga Coutinho (1970), who posits that critical consciousness is the result of engaging people in dialogue and the praxis of combining theory and action.

In continuation of this critical education legacy, SJYD theory highlights three additional components needed to bridge youth development research with application to demographics of students of color. These components include an emphasis on: (1) personal praxis (looking at self-awareness, social awareness, and global awareness); (2) praxis through youth culture (including being culturally relevant and incorporating the use of hip-hop culture); and (3) healing as an outcome and not just settling for resilience but promoting growth through hardship. Some scholars have begun to operationalize how this theory can be applied to helping empower high school students to cultivate their critical consciousness in after school hip-hop programs (Ginwright, Noguera, Cammarota, 2006; Slaten, Rivera, & Shemwell, 2016). However, there is a need to revisit the positive youth development framework around youth thriving with a lens that emphasizes cultural competence and promotes a critically conscious model of thriving that can be applied to a variety of settings.

A Culturally Competent Model for Promoting Thriving among Diverse Youth

We build off of the framework of Scales, Benson, and Roehlkepartain (2011) emphasizing the importance of Relationships, Sparks, and Voice and include also the components of cultural competence and social justice described by Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) to create a more robust model of youth thriving that can be operationalized in a variety of contexts with youth from diverse backgrounds. This model presented by Scales, Benson, and Roehlkepartain (2011) includes: (1) establishing relationships that exercise personal praxis by fostering strong cultural identities and cultivating critical consciousness in adults and youth; (2) identifying and cultivating Sparks in culturally competent ways; and (3) activating youth voice by promoting cultural resilience and positive social change. In the spirit of praxis (combining research, reflection, and practice), we will illustrate the research

base for this culturally competent model of thriving and will further illustrate how this model can be operationalized in various contexts through case studies from our work in schools and out-of-school contexts.

Relationships That Foster Cultural Identity and Critical Consciousness

The research of Scales et al. (2011) suggests that adolescents need positive developmental relationships with adults other than parents in order to thrive. Search Institute (2018) defines a positive developmental relationship as taking place in the life of a young person when an adult expresses care, promotes growth, provides support, shares power, and expands possibilities by connecting youth to people and places that broaden their world. These types of relationships are no doubt critically important and valuable; however, in order for youth of color to thrive, they also need these adults to be culturally competent in supporting them in the development of a positive cultural identity and critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is a way of being that focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world, allowing for the perception and exposure of social, cultural, and political contradictions. Critical consciousness also includes taking action against the oppressive elements in one's life that are illuminated by that understanding. To foster this kind of critical consciousness in youth, it has to start first in the lives of the adults. This process can begin by adults understanding how racism affects youth of color individually and institutionally. One way to ascertain a deeper understanding of how racism can be institutionalized and reproduced through systems is through critical race theory (Delgado & Stefacic, 2017).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the study of the relationship among race, racism, and power and can become a powerful lens for mentors and educators to utilize in understanding the experiences of students of color. CRT considers the intersections of economic structure, national history, culture, and conscious and unconscious feelings and examines the larger social structure that enables the status quo. Its focus is less on how and why students identify ethnically and racially and more about the ways in which the school responds to those identities and how this influences students' educational experiences. CRT provides a foundational language to help mentors and educators to take into account the implicit and explicit ways in which the dominant culture unconsciously or consciously creates advantages and disadvantages that are often played out in the education system. Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano (2009) offer four themes to summarize the foundations of CRT: (1) CRT maintains a commitment toward social justice by offering transformative solutions to racial, gender, and class oppression; (2) CRT utilizes the interdisciplinary knowledge of law, education, ethnic and women's studies, history, and sociology to better comprehend the experiences of people of color; (3) CRT separates race and racism from the analysis of gender

and class (critical race theorists postulate that racism has a micro and a macro component; this means that it emerges institutionally and individually on both an unconscious and conscious level and impacts both the individual and the group); (4) CRT challenges the assumptions of the dominant ideology by questioning mainstream beliefs regarding culture, intelligence, and capability. Adults committed to ensuring that every child can thrive and maximize his or her potential can embrace CRT as a basis for cultivating critical consciousness and healthy ethnic, racial, and cultural identities.

The connection with healthy identity development is based on the understanding that youth who have these qualities experience less emotional distress and increased well-being. For example, Dukes, Martinez, and Stein (1997) note that stronger ethnic identities weaken the impact of negative stereotypes and social denigration in individuals by giving access to a broadened understanding for the self that includes access to other sources of identity. Thus, positive developmental relationships between adults and youth of color need to nurture positive cultural identities and cultivate critical consciousness in order for them to decrease emotional distress and cultivate the individual and cultural power to thrive.

Fostering Culturally Relevant Sparks

Scales et al. (2011) suggest that another core strength youth need to foster is their “sparks” or areas of passion. The research suggests that only 60% of youth in their sample knew they had a spark and significantly fewer youth knew how to cultivate this. From our observation, one of the major contributing factors to youth not finding their passions is that sparks can be embedded in cultures or traditions that are different than the educator or the adult. This along with deficit models of viewing youth can lead to many students not discovering or cultivating their sparks. It is therefore important that mentors and educators take a culturally relevant approach when identifying and nurturing sparks of passion in their youth. Advocates of culturally responsive pedagogy strongly favor positioning students’ cultural knowledge at the core of instruction in order to engage student learning. This means, for working with students of color to achieve academic excellence, it is important to develop programs that use the characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogy to build upon on students’ strengths in promoting their racial identity and socialization.

Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. Gay (2010) highlights the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching as being: (1) validating and affirming as it acknowledges the strengths of

students from diverse backgrounds; (2) comprehensive in using the cultural resources to teach knowledge, values, skills, and attitudes; (3) multidimensional as it applies multicultural theory to the classroom environment, teaching methods, and evaluation; (4) liberating as it is directed toward liberating students from oppressive ideologies and realities; (5) empowering by giving students opportunities to excel in the classroom and beyond; (6) transformative as educators and students must often challenge education traditions that maintain the status quo. The results of an extensive literature review covering over 2,800 sources conducted by Hanley and Noblit (2009) indicate that culturally responsive approaches contribute to positive racial identity, resilience, and achievement. Hanley and Noblit conclude that an established link exists between culturally responsive pedagogy and achievement for students of color. These researchers also found that making this approach systemic also helps in confronting issues of racism and deficit thinking. Consistent with this finding, several cultural researchers contend that youth culture represents an unofficial dimension of pedagogical space where youth from diverse backgrounds are provided with protective factors for facing oppressive realities such as institutional racism (Freedman & Ball, 2004; Hull & Nelson, 2005).

Further, youth culture has historically provided youth with the cultural tools necessary for the production of counter-narratives to the official dimension of classroom learning. Thus, researchers like Hull and Zacher (2010) view out-of-school times as the space where literacy is most active and indicate that student performances through the material production of poetry and rap are more authentic indicators of youth literacy, identity development, and social practice. In examining the potential of hip-hop culture, Rose (1994) expresses that “rap music, more than any other form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant, ‘legitimate’ . . . ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality” (p. 102). Hip-hop based education (Petchauer, 2009) has become a popular and powerful way to engage youth sparks through the utilization of a model that acknowledges the sparks evident in the elements of hip-hop. It provides a lens by which youth sparks can be seen as manifestations of multiple intelligences with graffiti expressing visual intelligence, rap or spoken word expressing verbal intelligence, street entrepreneurship expressing numeric intelligence, breaking or popping expressing kinesthetic intelligence, promotion expressing interpersonal intelligence, street smarts expressing environmental intelligence, and expression of the blues narratives as manifesting intra-personal intelligence, the expression of the gospel narratives of redemption and hope manifesting spiritual intelligence (Gardner, 2011). By becoming students of students, we can learn what our students’ sparks are and use the classroom or youth development programs as opportunities to further cultivate these sparks and also bring content to life in culturally relevant and transformative ways.

Youth Voice: Promoting Cultural Resilience and Authentic Youth Empowerment

Scales et al. (2011) suggests that the final core strength required for youth to thrive is to foster a youth voice. They define youth voice as developing the confidence, skills, and opportunities to express and influence what's important to you. It is an important part of becoming active in community and civic life. However, their findings suggest that only 22% of all 15-year-olds—across all demographic groups—score high on the Teen Voice Index. Part of what is missing from this thriving model is understanding what youth voice is from the perspectives of youth and helping them to not only define but also develop the agency to embody this definition. An alternative definition of youth voice (as defined by youth) is “an expression of the human spirit that is shown in different forms such as art, words, poetry, and music. Engaging in the creation of your own opportunities to SPEAK OUT to authority. . . . Believing and putting our voices into practice so youth can be taken seriously” (Morrell, 2008). What is being explicated in this definition is that youth desire multidimensional, authentic, and transformative ways of being engaged that impact individuals and institutions. It is toward these topics that we will now shift our attention.

Youth Voice Expressed Intra-personally and Inter-personally through Cultural Resilience

Resilience has been defined as the ability to thrive in the face of adverse circumstances and often the focus is on how an individual's characteristics contribute to his or her resilience (Gordon & Coscarelli, 1996). Resilience emphasizes humans' remarkable ability to recover from adversity. Most of the research into this phenomenon focuses on trauma victims. However, Ginsberg (2011) proposes that children can be raised in a safe environment and still develop resilience. In a broader sense, resilience enables children to rise above difficult situations if adults believe in them unconditionally and hold them to high expectations. Consequently, Ginsberg (2011) has expanded Lerner's 5 C's model and has offered what he calls the “Seven C's” to help adults guide their youth's recognition of their own abilities and inner resources: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Contribution, Coping, and Control (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, Gestsdottir, & Smith, 2005). Clauss-Ehlers (2004) takes this view of resilience further, expanding the definition to include “cultural resilience”—how a person's “cultural background supports, values, and environmental experience help facilitate the process of overcoming adversity towards a culturally-focused resilient adaptation” (p. 28). Therefore, cultural values can influence the “child's cultural script for resilience” (p. 36). This enables us to perceive culture as a resource

that children can access in the way that Ginsberg (2011) theorizes and then identify ways for communities and families to utilize it as an asset to promote resilience among children. By nurturing resilience among students, they are able to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, and threats in order to better manage the stress and feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Through the development of cultural resilience, students are able to recognize and identify in themselves the competencies to cope with such experiences.

Resilience-focused research observes that individuals who successfully overcome challenges develop similar skills in adapting quickly to new circumstances, thriving amid constant change, and, most important, “bouncing back” (Ginsberg, 2011). Yet advocates of cultural resilience argue that more than individual strengths and characteristics are needed to enable individuals and communities to cope with, and overcome, adversity. Although adapting to changing environments can be challenging, proficiency in cultural resilience can help individuals transfer skills even across different environments. Cultural resilience has been correlated to competencies by E3: Equity, Excellence, and Education as competencies (also considered as inner strengths) acquired through diverse life experiences that are either positive or negative. High levels of these competencies have been observed in students of color from low-income families and in undocumented youth (Arauz, 2007). Seen through a strengths-based and culturally competent lens, students can learn to translate their cultural resilience into opportunities for authentic youth empowerment.

Youth Voice Expressed Institutionally in Organizations and Schools

The level of youth voice and leadership that is embodied by an organization, program, or initiative is evident in the language and practice it uses to engage them. A critical examination of the language and practice of youth-serving organizations and programs reveals a continuum of youth voice and engagement strategies starting from a prevention model to a collective empowerment model that impacts systemic change. The spectrum of youth engagement starts with the youth service approach being the least engaging, progresses to youth development, youth leadership, and civic engagement, and ends with youth organizing as the most effective method. In a youth services approach, the language used describes youth as clients that receive services to deal with individual problems and pathologies. This approach defines programs with terms like treatment, prevention, or intervention. Needless to say, these programs have the lowest level of youth engagement and authentic youth voice. A step up from this is a youth development approach, which provides support and services to youth that allows them access to safe spaces and caring adults. This approach meets young people

where they are and offers them opportunities for growth and development. It focuses on building competencies, offering age appropriate support, emphasizes positive identity, and enhances youth and adult partnerships.

A step up from a youth development approach is a youth leadership model that includes components of youth development but also builds in authentic youth leadership within the programming and organization structure. It helps youth develop a deeper historical and cultural understanding of their individual experiences and community issues. It builds capacity in youth to become youth decision-makers and problem-solvers involved in community projects. A step up from this is civic engagement, which includes elements from youth development and youth leadership models but also includes developing a deeper analysis of power structures and the impacts on one's identity formation. This approach builds a collective identity as change agents. It engages youth to become advocates on a variety of levels including, but not limited to, political advocacy and negotiation. Following this model, youth organizing is a term used to describe what many deem as the epitome of authentic youth voice.

Youth organizing embodies many of the elements youth leadership and civic engagement exemplifies, it also includes building a membership base, involves youth operating as part of a core staff, engages them as taking the lead in developing alliances and coalitions, and supports in transforming their external world both politically and creatively. This kind of approach can also be described as creating "youth driven spaces," where youth are actively involved in programming and organization decisions. It is important for all youth, particularly youth of color, to have opportunities to develop their cultural resilience and cultivate a sense of voice and ownership in the programs, policies, and practices of their youth-serving organizations, schools, and community.

Case Study Introduction: Combining Theory and Practice

In this section of the chapter, we now demonstrate how the ideas expressed in this model for culturally relevant thriving can be applied in schools and out-of-school time work with youth. In these case studies, you will also see how these ideas have been transformative both to youth and to us as educators and organization leaders. These stories are not meant to be prescriptive but descriptive on how these ideas can be integrated into education and youth work. In both instances, we were asked to partner with schools as outside consultants. This gave us an advantage of being able to have some administrative freedom in implementing these ideas. In both cases, however, buy in from administration, educators, and youth was absolutely necessary. We include youth here because often times a top-down approach leaves them out of the discussion.

Hip-Hop(e): A Culturally Relevant Example of Thriving in Communities and Schools

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Some community leaders and I were in shock when teens in our after-school hip-hop leadership program came in and told us that they felt like absolute failures at school. The disillusionment came about because these were the same youth who were presenting at regional conferences with members of Congress, opening up for international hip-hop acts, having magazine articles written about their work, and becoming regular guests on radio and television programs. These young people, primarily young men of color, were telling us that they were treated like they were stupid at school, and constantly singled out and disciplined unjustly. One young man told me, "I feel like I have been marked as a failure by teachers and the school as a whole, and they won't stop attacking me unless I either drop out or lose any sense of who I really am and accept this as the 'truth.'" Questions began to emerge for us like: How could students who were so engaged in one area of their lives be so disengaged in another? What would the impacts be if what we have been doing in after-school could be implemented during the school day? What was the relationship between the hopelessness that our young men were experiencing in school and the opportunity gap? How could we create an environment where these youth could thrive and cultivate the fruit of transformative hope?

These questions continued to come up until some colleagues and I wrote a proposal and finally received the funds to create a hip-hop leadership curriculum that could be implemented during the school day. In the true fashion of hip-hop, we remixed our experiences working with youth in out-of-school times with Social and Emotional Learning, Positive Youth Development, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy while designing the curriculum we later called *Fulfill the Dream* to be used during the school day. We felt inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, who helped us to define something that would help our students both acknowledge their concrete realities while also actively working toward the dreams of what is still possible (Freire, 2014). We realized that this critical, creative, and competent hope could not be schooled in our youth but it had to be educated and drawn out. We realized that there was no better way to engage this generation than to utilize the very culture they were immersed in. We decided to use hip-hop culture as the vehicle to engage youth and help them and their schools realize that they are an essential asset in changing the culture of the school. We called this pedagogy *Hip-Hope*, and after implementing our approach over the last 10 years, we have seen small alternative high schools with 100 students have 100% graduate rates after one year of implementation using school data

comparing numbers of youth who started the school year as seniors and ended the school year as seniors who graduated. In addition, we have seen GPAs go up as much as full points in as little as 10 weeks examining report card data comparing third quarter data to fourth quarter with 90 students in 3 classes. We have conducted quantitative inquiries and documented hope increasing, anger decreasing, and critical consciousness elevated to significant levels. What follows is how we first got started with Hip-Hope, and the essential lessons that we learned along the way can engage youth in ways that call them out as our greatest school assets capable of igniting new climates of hope.

Our opportunity came when the school district we were courting was labeled as being in “crisis” by articles coming out of the state newspaper. Seeing our opportunity, we approached the superintendent, who seemed like he would be open to a new approach to student engagement. He explained, “We have tried every intervention under the sun, but we haven’t tried this Hip-hop stuff, let’s see what that can do.” With his blessing we were sent into the “worst school” in the district. We met with the principals and were able to ascertain that the majority of issues were coming from four classes in the school, in which we realized they were warehousing their students of color. These students had been given every label under the sun from Emotional Behavior Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, to Oppositional Defiant Disorder. The last thing these youth needed was another intervention or prevention, what they needed was invention; which was to experience themselves in a new way that didn’t focus on their deficits. We decided that framing the purpose of the program to all of the students was important so we hosted an all-school assembly. We brought in local hip-hop artists, we spoke and announced that we were launching a hip-hop leadership program to a few classes of elite youth. This was on a Friday; on the following Monday, we showed up to the four classes and the youth were astounded we chose them. We told them that they had tremendous influence in the school and that we wanted them to use that influence to have a positive impact on the school. We explained that they had things they were passionate about and we wanted them to grow in these areas until they felt like they could make a positive contribution to the school culture. We held our program during homeroom once a week for about 45 minutes and gave the teachers follow-up lessons on the days we weren’t there. We required all teachers on the days we were there to engage with the students in the activities and discussions. About three weeks into it, we also started meeting with the youth after school to focus on creative skill development. This took place after the third lesson focused on assessing student passions and forms of multiple intelligences.

We facilitated discussions examining the difference between hip-hop culture and hip-hop industry. We explained that hip-hop culture had a long

history of youth empowerment, with practitioners seeing themselves as producers capable of wielding the power to change their realities. We contrasted this with showing video clips that demonstrated how hip-hop industry was more focused on having power over young people, shaping them to see themselves as consumers, and ultimately stripping them of their power to change reality by keeping them believing fantasy and myths about themselves. We encouraged youth to think critically about the media and music they were ingesting, and similar to how hip-hop deejays sampled from classic hit records to create new sounds, encouraged them to start being intentional about “sampling” from the examples of people who lived purposefully that they knew. Instead of mimicking these elders, we encouraged them to “remix” these examples into ways that were authentic to who they are and what they are passionate about. As facilitators, we got to be open about our own lives and shared our own personal historical records of what we felt proud of and experiences that were painful. One teacher opened up and shared an experience about losing her father just the previous summer, and in tears said she being a teacher was one way she felt like she made him proud. We encouraged students to consider their own legacies and to realize that whether they acknowledged it or not, the young students in the school were being influenced by their examples for better or worse. We then challenged them to think about what kind of “sounds” they wanted the music of their lives to make, and how they wanted that to move people.

Instead of asking “are” they smart, we encouraged youth to ask “how” are they smart. We explained that just as they exhibited passion in the elements of hip-hop culture (dance, visual art, music, poetry, rap, etc.), they were also demonstrating multiple forms of intelligence (Gardner, 2011), and that like a physical muscle, this intelligence could be strengthened (Delpit, 2006). This meant they could not only exercise their passions and expressions after school but also in applying these creative muscles to achieving academically. We encouraged them to be a good “crew” to one another, which not only meant calling out one another’s spark of passion (Benson, 2008), but encouraging one another to taking positive risks to fan these sparks into flame. Youth were challenged to look at the untapped resources of their school and find creative ways to use these fires to change the culture and climate of the schools.

We helped youth realize that they had a voice in not only sharing their “blues” stories and developing social awareness and self-management skills in the process but also that they could listen deeply to the stories of others and cultivate deeper social awareness and empathy. The voicing of personal struggle and the dialogues that took place moved the group to create a deeper critical consciousness about their realities and a beloved community where radical healing could take place (Ginwright, 2010), and it nurtured an awareness that they could use their voices to make a difference. Radical healing is

a healing process where healing occurs on the individual, community, and broader societal levels by creating spaces where youth engage in healing activities and exercise their imagination about how their political realities can change. Youth decided that they wanted to help reinvigorate the school talent show and used it as a platform to unleash their newfound hope on the school and community at-large.

Our youth were not only the masters of ceremony of the event but also participated in skits about racism in the school, shared poems about struggle, and performed raps about transformation and hope. One chorus in their song went:

It is not a new but an old thing
We are working hard man trying to let our soul bling
We're not concerned what your gold brings
We got a purpose and it is more than trying to hold things
You serving them death I'm serving them life
You serving them wrong I am serving them right
You are either part of the problem or the solution
So let's solve our problems and start a movement.

The youth got a standing ovation, and fortunately the data also stood out as we saw GPAs went up half a point on average in the four classes, attendance improved, and behavior issues went down. Interviews with principals included stories of these youth being involved in creative conflict resolution and some even breaking up fights. Upon sharing this data with the superintendent, he called for a town-hall meeting where we shared the pre- and post-data but also had an opportunity for the youth to share their stories. One young man said, "My brother is in a gang and I have been planning to join later this year, but I am not anymore because now I realize I have a dream and can see how school connects to me fulfilling that dream." Another young man said he "used to smoke weed every day after school but now I stopped because I can say I have hope." Upon hearing this, the Chief of Staff probed him and asked: "What kind of hope is this, hope you have today and is gone tomorrow?" He looked her firmly in the eye and said, "This is a hope I will have for the rest of my life." These young men of color involved with the group went on to get on the honor roll and became the agents of change that later made this leadership program schoolwide, allowing us to do cultural competence training with the entire school and later other schools in the district. This training began with educators building their social and emotional and cultural competence personally first; and then continued on to how they could apply this pedagogically in engaging youth. We found that

starting at the personal level in cultivating competencies was an important foundation for teachers then leveraging this competence in their engagement of students. This foundation later served as our launch pad to do work across the nation and world.

Connecting the Case Study to a Model of Culturally Competent Thriving

Operationalizing a culturally relevant application of thriving, we saw how relationships are formulated when people see the assets in each other and build trust. What if we saw our youth not as problems to be fixed but as solutions waiting to be unleashed? Had we come into the school with another intervention seeking to “fix” students, we would have never had seen the same level of progress. What our youth were hungry for was the *invention* of new opportunity to experience themselves in a different light. We needed to see them not as being full of deficits but full of assets and sparks of passion. They needed to know that their passions were indeed manifestations of multiple forms of intelligence. Yes, even if they were into graffiti, this was really a manifestation of visual intelligence that could be recognized, cultivated, and applied to enhance achievement. Lastly, these youth needed to have a voice and be given the opportunity to contribute to the school, we realized that they singlehandedly had greater ability to change the climate and culture in the school than anyone else. The solutions that these young people unleashed were unmatched by any other person in authority at either the school or district level. They just needed an opportunity to take a positive risk and apply their ideas. In the words of Dr. King, “Society will tell you that you are a thermometer, but in fact you are a thermostat.” What if the key to transforming the culture and climate of public education was through the igniting of hip-hop in our youth who are most marginalized and deemed at-risk?

Changing One Practice That Changes Beliefs: A Case Model for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

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Having established a nonprofit organization designed to support educators in becoming more effective in reaching a diverse student population, it became increasingly evident that the so-called student achievement gap is more like a *teacher-belief-in-student gap*. Consequently, I intended to find a way to speed up the process that institutionalized critical reflection in which educators would see the brilliance in every student. Realizing that changing the mind of teachers to see brilliance in a historically marginalized student

population was difficult if not impossible, a group of us developed an asset-based culturally responsive assessment that translated the lived experiences of students into 21st century skills. These 21st century skills were based on seven survival skills by Wagner (2010) and the four C's from Kay and Greenhill (2013). Our guiding framework for cultural resilience applied these concepts in a strength-based and culturally relevant way to specifically reach adolescents from diverse backgrounds.

Our Cultural Resilience Assessment tool became a tool for educators, with a wide variety of cultural competence, to use in better engaging their students. The first step was to provide them with an ability to first recognize their students' cultural strengths and brilliance. In addition, the tool allowed the teachers a way to assess and become more reflective of their own practice of engaging youth in culturally responsive ways. For those who were already culturally responsive, this tool enhanced their effectiveness with students by giving them a metric to use to see gains in student skills. For those who were not culturally responsive educators, their lack of cultural competence did not become a barrier—rather through their training and utilization of the tool, their mindset shifted as they began to better recognize the brilliance in students in a similar way that culturally responsive educators could.

The instrument developed has been named the Educational Strengths Assessment Tool or (ESAT). The E3 inventory named (ESAT) can best be classified as a targeted biographical data (bio data) assessment. Bio data assessments are a relatively common and long-standing assessment approach within the applied world. Generally speaking, bio data measures include items about past events and behaviors reflecting personality attributes, attitudes, experiences, interests, skills, and abilities validated as predictors of overall performance. Specific to the ESAT, the expectation is that the assessment is predictive of a targeted performance dimension, based on five competencies; innovation, adaptability, critical analysis, cross-cultural analysis, and teamwork, which we collectively define as cultural resilience.

Once teachers implement the ESAT, they demonstrate a stronger willingness to critically reflect on their own practice. As stated by the Freire Institute, the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality is through reflection and action. Action is fundamental because it is the process of changing the reality. We all acquire social myths that have a dominant tendency, and so learning is a critical process that depends upon uncovering real problems and actual needs. However, it is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. Critical praxis is when they act together upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection.

So my case study is of a school community that exemplifies these concepts and emulates the concept of cultural resiliency as well as the definition of

critical praxis, cultural humility diversity, and culturally responsive teaching. I recall entering this K–8 school community of 250 relatively ethnically diverse students with about 70% of students of color representing countries from Haiti, England, Korea, Philippines, and a dozen Spanish-speaking countries as well as diversity of income levels. In addition, there is a diversity of socioeconomic classes of people who own their own homes and second homes as well as those renting apartments with another family. Finally, there is diversity of language, as well as diversity of political thoughts, in this school community.

While there were amazing results that the school has demonstrated, the process was a mutual transformational for our organization as well as the educators. For example, not only did the school demonstrate student achievement but more important the teachers expressed an increase in belief in the capabilities of students over the course of the school year. This school community taught us that regurgitation of content knowledge on cultural competency is not as powerful as the practice of culturally responsive strategies. Therefore, the traditional approach to train educators in learning how to be culturally responsive is not the methodology we utilized as a way to institutionalize culturally responsive practices.

As the narrative goes in a very stereotypical fashion, a white-led faculty was teaching students of color and a low-income community that utilized a banking method-deficit approach. There were teachers who would request English only in this classroom or students teasing each other for having different accents in speaking English. When the school leadership requested our assistance, several teachers could not see the challenges and responded with “English is the official language why are we not just teaching English to all of our students.” I recall one of the educators sharing with me that everything is black-and-white to which I agreed that it’s both. I responded by sharing that English is important to teach and that it is also important to be multilingual. I then asked the educator why we would want to limit students to only one language. She did not have a response and it was the beginning of expanding the teacher’s approach to culturally responsive pedagogy.

The first step was to take the leadership under training in how to implement culturally responsive tools. These tools focused on identifying the brilliance of students, developing engagement strategies for students, and creating lesson plans that were culturally inclusive to the student population. This did not mean we bypassed the educators who did not have a culturally responsive approach to their teachers, rather the focus was to ask these educators to implement the equitable teaching practices. This included specifically asking educators to pilot the E3 assessment tool that translates the life experiences of students into 21st-century competencies. In turn, educators did not focus on the struggles of students, but rather the strengths that they brought and in a way educators could understand. Another specific

implementation tool was to pilot the engagement identification tool, in which educators look at data as indicators to focus on engagement strategies. Through these two examples, the educators were more engaged to learn how to teach to students whose data demonstrated they had strengths as opposed to getting stuck on how hard it was to motivate students who had low test scores or behavior challenges.

As a result, the buy-in by educators became much easier as the results came in after the first year. For example, 3rd grade reading is widespread as a benchmark to identify how well students are doing in school. In this school community, the students on average did better than the state average. More important, the top quartile of students who already met reading levels had increased their reading level at a higher percentage than the rate of the state average. On the other end of the spectrum, the lowest quartile of students who were below grade level in their reading level and met 3rd grade reading level compared to the state average. After several years of these results, this led the faculty and leadership team to buy into believing that their students were brilliant because they had spent an entire year practicing these culturally responsive practices. As a result of faculty buy-in, there has been an ongoing practice of critical reflection from lesson plans to overall school policy. The weekly professional learning communities established in faculty meetings look at student achievement as indicators for how they are teaching rather than indicators of a student's capability. In fact, at the recent graduation ceremony, they celebrated the event by speaking in multiple languages. This was quite a turnaround given the fact that some of those same teachers were resistant to teaching anything more than English in their schools. Some of those same teachers introduced diplomas in the native language of the student's family. By no means is this school community an exemplar of cultural competency, but it is representative of many schools and it is a prototype of how other educational institutions can focus some of their energy on changing practices to be more culturally responsive rather than changing beliefs of educators. I end with one of the highlights of a testimony from one of the educators:

E3 has developed tools that will forever impact how institutions see our young people of color and more importantly how young people see themselves. Instead of being labeled as broken, they can see their true assets, strength and incredible resilience. The gifts our young people hold, just may be the answer to a world that has lost its way. Our policies, systems and institutions were constructed under an inequitable narrative and indoctrination that has labeled incorrectly so many. Had I taken his assessments in my youth, I might not have spent so many years thinking I was broke, but rather I had something incredible to offer the world, and I may have offered it up sooner. I was blown away at how a tool and process could have such an impact on the outcomes for young people. Powerful!

Conclusion

Creating organizations, programs, and classrooms that allow all youth to thrive can seem daunting at first glance, but this need not be the case. As we have highlighted in this chapter, cultural competence can be woven into the development of relationships that cause youth to think critically, identify their sparks and cultural forms of expression, and foster a sense of authentic voice that promotes personal healing and social change. An initial step in getting this process underway is to begin to assess and identify the cultural strengths and assets that are already present in a given situation. As Roberto discusses in his case study, it took identifying the key administration and teaching staff that was willing to champion a culturally competent and strength-based approach to engaging the youth who were disengaged to begin to shift the narrative about the under-performing youth. From our collective experience, we have seen that every organization, school, and community has champions (even if it is only one or two) that are willing to engage youth in culturally relevant and strength-based ways, and are looking for an opportunity. Starting with this cohort of champions is key to demonstrating the power of cultivating cultural competence in the programs, pedagogy, and policies that follow. Another way to begin to recognize the champions in a school is to administer a culturally relevant assessment among the teachers. As Ladson-Billings and others have suggested, this can be a great way to see who already has cultural competency, to understand where the cultural blind spots are, and to begin to develop a plan of action for professional development that meets the needs of the school or organization.

As Juan Carlos highlights in his case study, assessments can also be administered to youth to help them recognize their own cultural resilience while also allowing educators a way to reflect on their own pedagogy and practice. From our vantage point, no human being ever reached his or her optimal performance by focusing solely on what they were not good at. By engaging youth in strength-based ways that highlight their own 21st-century skills and cultural capital, this momentum can be transferred to a variety of activities that can enhance cognitive, emotional, and social well-being. As Juan Carlos's case study suggests, assessing the cultural strengths youth already possess inter-personally, intra-personally, and as they navigate institutions can cultivate their positive cultural identity development, bolster confidence, and increase their academic self-efficacy. However, as the examples that were discussed show, developing a strategy and plan for cultural competence training is also suggested. This can take place in three ways: (1) identifying someone in the school or district that is highly skilled in the area of cultural competence and organizing a training with them; (2) identifying someone at a local university or college who demonstrates a history of facilitating cultural competence and/or equity training; and (3) connecting to national organizations and experts who provide cultural competence and

equity training. In all the examples above, the efforts should build capacity in the local champions so that they can take the lead in assessing, implementing, reflecting, and improving these efforts. Developing a culture of improvement and structured professional learning communities can enhance impact and ensure sustainability.

Beyond engaging local staff and educators to increase their cultural competence and ability to engage youth in culturally relevant ways, efforts should be taken to increase voice and choice for youth and others in their community. The thriving of young people in culturally competent ways is an undertaking that cannot be done in isolation. Again, assessments and data can become tools to help parents and community leaders understand the level of thriving that students are experiencing. Approaches like appreciative inquiry allow for, once strengths have been identified, the engagement of the community in conversations to dream about how to leverage these strengths to improve youth and community outcomes (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

Once stakeholders express their desire to create impact, outcomes can be identified, and actions steps and accountability structures can be implemented. Engaging youth and communities in processes influenced by learning sciences and design thinking can be extremely valuable in creating culturally competent communities of improvement (Buchanan, 1992). Youth can be and should become important participants in these school climate, organization, and community improvement groups. As we have discussed in this chapter, authentic youth participation and voice engagement is an important goal to identify and work toward. Engaging with the “end user” that the curriculum, programs, and policies are designed to serve can ensure that root issues are identified and the full assets and sparks of students are included in the creation of viable solutions. For example, engaging youth and community in developing solutions to increase attendance, increasing classroom participation, and improved disciplinary outcomes in schools is key to increasing student engagement and disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline.

Finally, creating the context where all young people can thrive requires both top-down and bottom-up collaboration (Snapp, Russell, Arredondo, & Skiba, 2016). This “tree-top” and “grass-roots” collaboration is necessary and essential for the final process of collective healing as expressed by Laenui (2000). While not all educators will understand or agree that our educational institutions are designed to obtain the results that are statistically predictable, the collective healing journey that each of us must engage in is the ultimate process for all students to thrive. Youth thriving has a reciprocally transformative impact on the well-being outcomes of organizations and the community. Thus, it takes the full obligation of all vested stockholders to create culturally competent conditions for youth to thrive, especially for

youth of color who are most vulnerable. The framework highlighted here was designed to be clear, doable, and consistently documented across disciplines. It is now time to move from discussion and documentation about cultural competence and equity to instead making the commitment and taking the action to create the conditions by which all youth can thrive under our care.

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