Using Student Voices to Design Culturally Responsive and Just Schools

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> "Culture is central to learning... Culturally Responsive Teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning." (Ladson-Billings 1994, 29)

As a beginning teacher, I entered a classroom where most of my students did not look like me in a district where over eighty languages were spoken. Those first few years I struggled to connect with many students in my classroom, especially with African American and Latino males. I found myself at a crossroads. I could buy into "it's them, not me," or I could admit that obviously there was a pattern to this disconnect and that I was the common denominator. I struggled until I stumbled upon the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Gloria Ladson-Billings introduced the concept of culturally responsive teaching in her book *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (1994, 2009). In her research Ladson-Billings examined the disconnect between the home experiences of students of color and their experiences at school. She concluded that the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices of communities of color are resources to honor, explore, extend, and build on in formal educational settings. In practice, culturally responsive teaching, thus, uses the "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles" of students of color to make learning more relevant, meaningful, and validating (Gay 2000, 29).

With this research in mind, my colleagues Graig Meyer and Bonnie Davis introduced high school students in our Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate program (a program serving 120+ youth of color in grades 4 through 12) to a set of research-based culturally responsive teaching strategies. After reviewing the strategies, the students identified six key concepts they felt would be transformative for both teachers and students if the concepts were applied in learning spaces (see sidebar, opposite). The six concepts build on one another. All of them require attention to create the kinds of learning environments for which our students advocated. As the students explained, if every teacher and school wove these concepts into their learning and teaching efforts, they, as students of color, and their peers, would achieve more and feel more comfortable in their classrooms.

After identifying the concepts, the students and I then worked to use the concepts as a framework to create professional development for the teachers in our school district. The professional development sessions were facilitated by fifteen to twenty high school students (known as Student Six facilitators); I was a co-facilitator. My co-facilitators, students who were immersed in busy high school lives, committed to attend one two-hour workshop a month, to read the same research the teacher participants read, to speak their truth, and to share their stories in front of an audience of adults who were also their teachers. In our four years of implementation, participants consistently reported that the student-voice piece was one of the aspects that made the professional development so powerful.

Student Voices

While research exists that discusses why we need to adopt these key concepts (and I'll briefly discuss why later in this article), I believe it is important that we listen to the voices of our students. Below, Student Six facilitators share their thoughts, ideas, and views on each of the six components. As you listen to their voices, I challenge you to use the questions in the sidebar on page 44 to reflect on your own practice and consider how you embrace each of these key concepts.

Visibility and Proximity

The Student Six facilitators described visibility as creating a learning space in which every student feels acknowledged, valued, and included as an equal member of the learning community. Proximity is defined as using physical space, personal space, and design to engage students and reduce perceived threat. These two concepts work closely together in how we approach students and design our learning spaces.

When sharing the concept of visibility with teachers and staff, the students identified some key strategies school librarians can use to welcome and engage all students:

- greet students when they enter the space,
- know students' names and how to pronounce them, and
- make a place for student voices.

Maria, one of our Student Six facilitators, shared how important it is to her that her teachers greet her and make a connection. "It makes me feel like they care that I am there. But some of my teachers don't do that. So I decided I would do it. I walk in each day, and I greet them. I say 'Hi!' or ask how their weekend was. I hope that if they see it is important to me, they might start doing it themselves."

Jotham shared about one of his favorite teachers. "He always greeted us when we came in and told us goodbye when we left. He made us feel like he knew each of us as people and cared that we were there each

day." In contrast, Jotham explained, "We had a teacher who came late in the year to replace a teacher who left. This [new] teacher never bothered to learn our names. One day he wanted me to do something, so he snapped his fingers and said 'You, do this.' By not taking the time to learn our names, he communicated to us that we were out of place, disregarded, and not welcome in his classroom."

Richard, a virtual non-reader when he entered ninth grade, told us that the school library became one of his favorite places to go because "Our librarian is awesome. She knows our names and always asks you questions about what's going on. She helps us find books and anything else that we need. I never thought I would say that going to the library is one of my favorite things to do."

When it comes to proximity, as Erika pointed out, "When you stay behind your desk (or other furniture) it makes me feel less welcome."

Maria reminded us, "Being able to work with other people is important. I like it when we can move chairs and desks and work together." But Jose shared "Sometimes I like group work, and sometimes I like to just work by myself."

Corrinia reminded us that even the best strategy can be overused. "As a Black student there are times when teachers use proximity a little too much. When you keep standing by me or walking past me, it can make me feel like you don't trust me."

Connecting to Students' Lives

The Student Six facilitators defined this concept as creating learning spaces where content and students' experiences and perspectives are linked together to help students understand themselves and their

THE STUDENT SIX CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS.

VISIBILITY: Creating learning spaces in which every student feels acknowledged, valued, and included as equal members of the community.

PROXIMITY: Using physical space, personal space, and design to engage students and reduce perceived threat.

CONNECTING TO STUDENTS' LIVES: Creating learning spaces where content is linked to student experiences and perspectives for the purpose of helping students understand themselves and their history.

ENGAGING STUDENTS' CULTURES: Incorporating positive elements of students' cultures into learning and community building in appropriate ways.

ADDRESSING RACE: Using content and discussion to talk openly about race, racial dynamics, and how they impact the student experience.

CONNECTING TO THE LARGER WORLD AND STUDENTS' FUTURE SELVES: Creating learning opportunities that help students identify their future paths and using learning experiences to guide students toward attaining their personal goals.

history. They encouraged educators to get to know their students so they can make these connections.

"My teacher knows the kinds of things we are interested in. She includes those things in our class discussions or examples. It keeps us interested," said Jaylan.

Antonio reminded us that it is important to remember that connecting to our students' lives sometimes means being willing to learn from them. "There's so many ways to speak Spanish. My Spanish teacher asks me sometimes, 'What's the Mexican word for that? What about the Honduran word?' because he knows my parents speak Spanish from those countries. That's awesome that he wants to know every type of Spanish, not just what he learned in college."

Maritza talked about her U.S. history class. "I learn so much better when what we are studying connects with our day-to-day life. In my U.S. history class, we studied the Civil War. My teacher connected it to the Civil Rights movement and with the immigration movement of today. And we were able to talk about the DREAM Act, which is an important topic for me."

When we talked in our professional development sessions about connecting to students' lives, Gabriela passionately reminded educators that they must get to know students, not just assume. She shared, "One time my math teacher made word problems with our names in them. My name was in a problem where it talked about how many tacos were eaten. I'm from Columbia! We don't eat tacos! I was so mad that the teacher assumed because of my accent and my Latina heritage that all of us must eat the same foods."

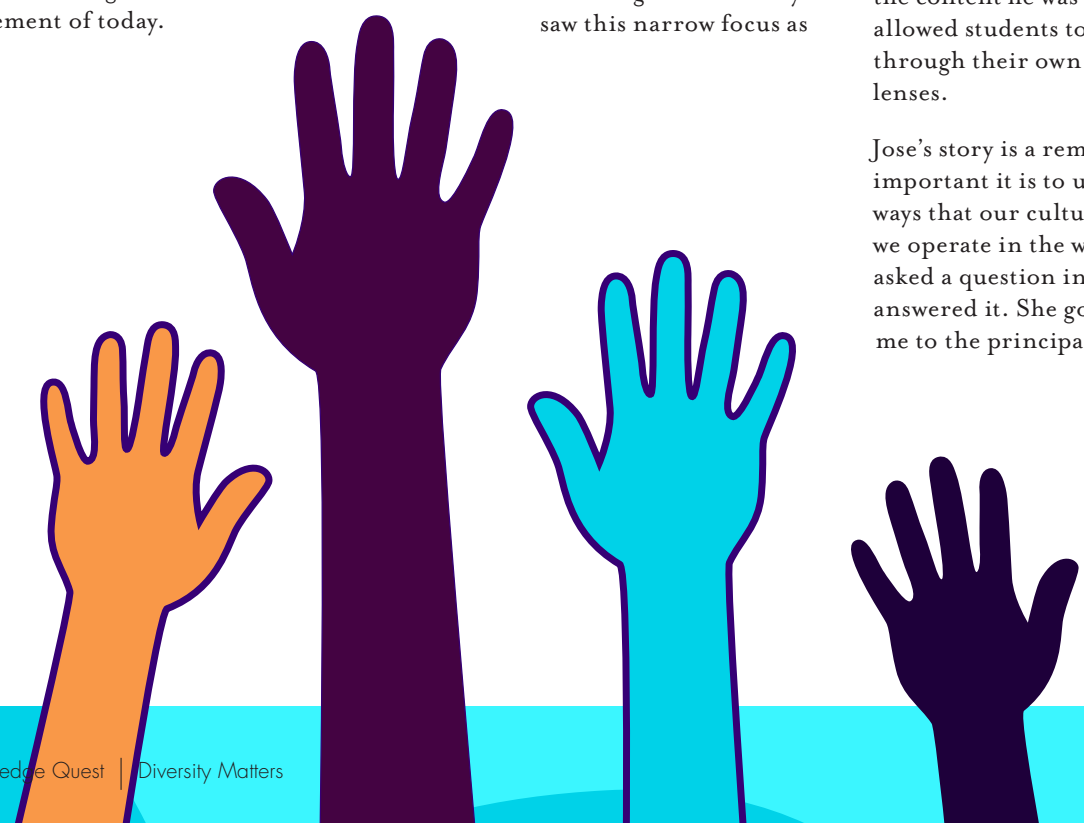
Engaging Students' Cultures

We defined this concept as incorporating positive elements of students' cultures into learning and community building in appropriate ways. After one of our sessions on this concept, one of the students said, "Ms. B, I don't think they really understand culture. When we talk about it, people always focus just on race." The other students agreed that they saw this narrow focus as well. So we did some research and reading and came up with a working definition for culture. We defined culture as all of the influences that shape our values and beliefs and how we operate in the larger world. Our culture consists of our ethnicity, race, religion, neighborhood, part of the country we live in, sexual orientation, family—all of those factors that influence who we are.

Often in schools and classrooms incorporating students' cultures takes a "holidays and heroes" approach. Multicultural festivals or potlucks are held, or festivities and activities center around something like Black History Month. While these are not bad ideas, they do not truly incorporate and honor student culture as a part of the learning process.

Manuel shared the story of his Spanish teacher who taught about the Day of the Dead. "He had us research what our own family or culture does to celebrate this day or our family who have died. Then we shared that with the class." Manuel's teacher took a topic pertinent to the content he was teaching and allowed students to explore the topic through their own personal cultural lenses.

Jose's story is a reminder of how important it is to understand all the ways that our culture influences how we operate in the world. "My teacher asked a question in class, and I answered it. She got mad and sent me to the principal's office. When



I explained to the principal what happened, he asked me, 'Jose, do you know what a rhetorical question is?' He explained it to me. I told him those don't exist in my culture. In my culture when an adult asks you a question, you are supposed to answer. I went back to class and apologized to my teacher and explained what happened."

Addressing Race

We defined "addressing race" as using content and discussion to talk openly about race, racial dynamics, and how they impact the student experience. When we approach this topic, it often creates some disequilibrium for our participants. The previous concepts usually closely align with some current practices of educators. In contrast, for many educators, this is the first time they have been involved in an open, honest conversation about race. Jotham told us, "It's necessary to talk about race because most of the time race takes the backseat to everything."

Jotham referred back to his favorite teacher and shared about a discussion in class where the issue of race was central. "It was our social studies class. Our teacher asked us 'Do race and social class have an effect on the rising incarceration rate?'." Jotham shared that a white student responded to the question by saying, "They (the Black community) choose to live in low-income communities, choose to go to prison, and are in the situations they are in because they didn't take advantage of opportunities given to them." Jotham said, "No one in the classroom responded, including my teacher. I was upset because I felt disrespected by the comment." Jotham eventually spoke up, sharing the realities of race and the oppression still experienced in the Black community. "I wanted my teacher to understand that conversations about race are important and sometimes they get messy, but that's okay."

As we prepared for our session on this topic one year, Alexa got frustrated and called out, "Why aren't any of my teachers talking about Ferguson? That's my dad, my cousins, my boyfriend, my friends. Why aren't we talking about it?" We talked about what we had learned about the hesitance of teachers to address race and brainstormed how we could incorporate Alexa's thoughts and concerns into our training. The consensus amongst all the student facilitators is that, they don't expect educators to be perfect or to get it perfectly right. But ignoring the conversations cuts much deeper than stumbling a little when we try.

Connecting to the Larger World and Students' Future Selves

One of the student facilitators described this as the "Why do we need to know this?" answer. We define this concept as creating learning opportunities that help students identify their future paths and using learning experiences to guide students in attaining their personal goals.

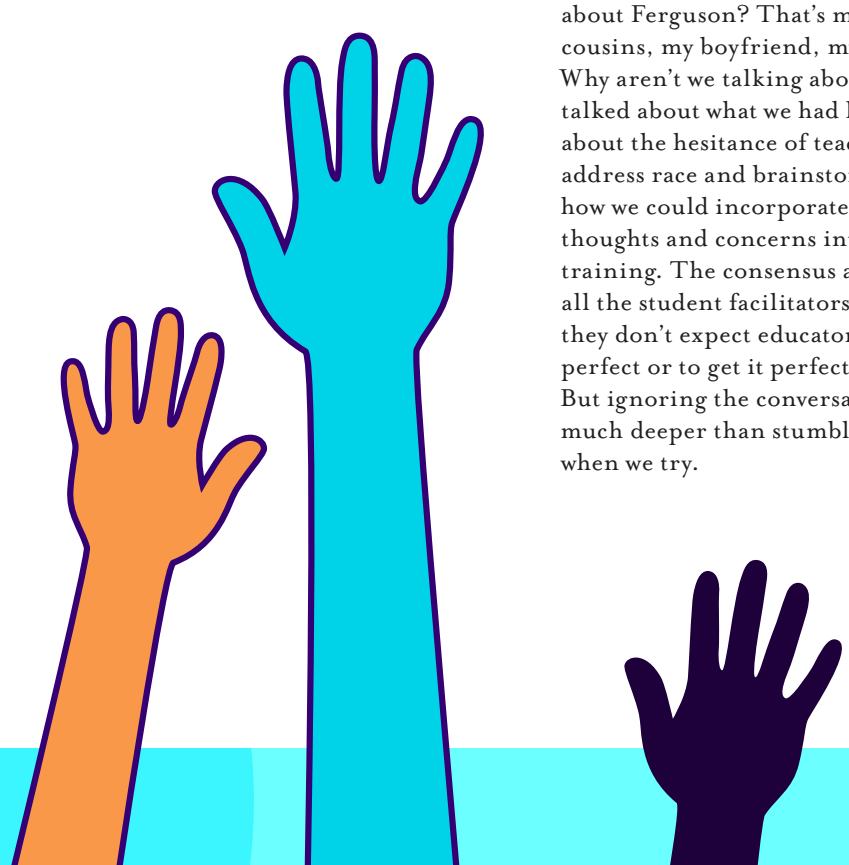
Erika talked about her early struggles as a student who entered school speaking no English. "I am where I am today because of teachers who helped me learn the language. And teachers who helped me create a picture of who I could become."

Michela attended a summer writing camp sponsored by one of her teachers. There she was introduced to several authors of color through mentor texts and in-person visits. "I never thought about being a writer. But now I think maybe that's what I want to do for a career."

Kiana's teacher had students tackle a real-world problem they wanted to solve. The students researched and developed and presented their solution to the issue. Kiana shared, "You know, I'm not always the best at school. Some of my grades make people think I am not a good student. But I know I have something to say. And, yeah, I think the world is gonna hear from me."

Why These Six Concepts Are Important

I've already shared with you that when I walked into my first classroom as a new teacher twenty-six years ago over half of the students in my classroom did not look like me. Today this is the reality for many educators. In 2014, an article



REFLECT ON YOUR OWN PRACTICE

VISIBILITY AND PROXIMITY

How welcoming is your school library? What attitudes, policies, and practices create this environment?

Do you know whether students feel visible in your space? How do you know? If not, how might you find out?

How is your learning space arranged? Does it create opportunities for group learning as well as quiet places for individuals?

Is your signage clear? In various languages to allow students to easily find what they need?

CONNECTING TO STUDENTS' LIVES

Does your library collection reflect your students' interests and lives?

Are the available resources varied, diverse, and in multiple languages?

Do you check to ensure that materials and resources appropriately represent various groups?

Do displays in the library reflect a wide range of interests and people?

CONNECTING TO STUDENTS' CULTURES

In what ways can you use your library programming to honor and embrace the various cultures represented in your school?

What connections can you create with the local community to help facilitate this diversity of programming?

ADDRESSING RACE

What opportunities for explicitly addressing race might arise in your library setting?

How might you handle these discussions?

What opportunities do you have to create space for these important conversations?

CONNECTING TO THE LARGER WORLD AND STUDENTS' FUTURE SELVES

How does your library programming help students connect to the larger world?

Do students see themselves now and in the future in the materials and programming available?

in *Education Week* stated that in the 2014–2015 school year "the overall number of Latino, African-American, and Asian students in public K–12 classrooms is expected to surpass the number of non-Hispanic whites" (Maxwell 2014).

Twenty-six years ago, when asked about race, my response was, "I don't see color. I just see my students." I was not alone then, or even now, in thinking this way. Researchers Hazel Rose Markus, Claude M. Steele, and Dorothy M. Steele identified colorblindness—the belief that it is best to simply not see race or racial group differences, but to view students only as people—as a common ideology among educators (2000).

Terry L. Cross and his colleagues referred to this tendency as "cultural blindness." They argue that systems that embrace cultural blindness "function with the belief that color or culture make no difference and that all people are the same" (1989, 15). However, as Cross and colleagues pointed out, "The consequences of such a belief are to make services so ethnocentric as to render them virtually useless to all but the most assimilated people of color. Such services ignore cultural strengths, encourage assimilation, and blame the victim for their problems" (1989, 30).

In direct contrast to the cultural blindness or colorblindness philosophies is research that shows that students of color are more academically successful when their culture is valued, their race is acknowledged, and specific attention is paid to their evolving racial identity (Hanley and Noblit 2009). Mary S. Hanley and George W. Noblit noted, "There is sufficient evidence to argue that both culturally responsive pedagogy and positive racial identity promote academic achievement and resilience. In-school and out-of-school programs can be designed to develop these linkages and to more generally promote the wider project of racial uplift" (2009, 11).

Achieving "cultural proficiency" as Cross, Ladson-Billings, and others have stated is not contingent upon one or two practices. There is no single "right" way to create culturally responsive learning communities. The Student Six facilitators have shared that it is the effort of the adults around them that the students value more than the adults' getting it all right. That valuing, along with the compelling research, creates for us an imperative that as educators we must strive for cultural proficiency to help our students be successful. The rewards when we embrace the Student Six ideas are high. If we ignore these ways to make all of our students feel valued, engaged, and empowered, the consequences are too grave.

Moving Forward

While you can use the ideas shared by the Student Six facilitators, it is even more important for you to consider how you might invite the voices of *your* students into your planning and programming. As I've discussed, the six concepts our students identified are supported by research and connect to what we know is good practice. However, in the four years the students and I presented together, I learned much more from them about how to support students of color. We adapted our professional development each time based on students' ideas and input. Don't be afraid to listen to your students and take the journey toward creating culturally responsive and just schools together.

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