

Foundations of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Candidate name: Octavia Wolf

Date of submission: September 12th, 2021

Assessment A: Cultural Self-Study

Due by the end of Week 2

Overview

As the introduction to this week states, knowing and understanding yourself is a doorway to knowing and understanding your students and their cultures. Think about the articles and resources you have read and explored about knowing yourself and your own cultural beliefs and biases. Consider how all of this information fits together to create a cultural snapshot and study of you.

Instructions

Complete your Cultural Self-Study as follows:

- As you read in Chapter 4 of *Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain*, begin with an intention.
- Complete the readings and websites for Week 2, including the self-reflection tools and the tests for hidden biases made available in the resources.
- Throughout Weeks 1-2 of this module, be aware of your words, actions, and feelings, when with students and others, keeping in mind what you have learned about culture, bias, and microaggressions.
- Write a self-study about your cultural identity development, the implications of your cultural identity on your teaching and your students' learning, and next steps that you will take based on the self-study.

Your final submission should be 4-6 double-spaced pages, excluding references. Your References page should also be double-spaced.

Cultural Self-Study

According to Chapter 4 of *Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain* (Hammond, 2015), introspective reflections about one's implicit biases, cultural identity, and the impact it has upon teacher and student learning should always begin with an intention. For the exercise of this cultural self-study, my intention is to use Hammond's framework for self-reflection to identify my cultural frame of reference, widen my aperture as it pertains to the diverse experiences and backgrounds of the students I serve, and identify my key triggers (p. 56). By the end of this self-study, I should walk away with a clearer understanding of the beliefs and assumptions which underscore my pedagogical practices and three specific actions that I will take to continue the self-work required of a culturally responsive educator.

Three salient dimensions within my identity which I have chosen to reflect upon are race, gender, and ability. As a Black woman, I find it difficult to separate the influence of my race and gender when considering how I view and interact with the world and how those around me perceive me. Most of the convergence for these two identities is deeply tied to my physical form which is both cisgender female and darker skinned. To analyze these two identities more separately from one another, I considered experiences where I felt highly aware of my cisgender female body. When I turned ten, my body began developing at a rapid pace and I began to hear derisive comments about how I clothed myself. In middle school, I was frequently "dress coded" at school over the length of my skirts, the tightness of my jeans, and the presence of cleavage (over which I had little control over as a 36DD as a 6th grader). In reflection, much of this had to do with the fact that I was one of few Black girls that attended a mostly white suburban school in Virginia. According to Lee (2015), "the dominant groupthink wants to swallow up anyone falling outside of their prescriptive narrow bounds of acceptance". In the case of my Black girlhood, the very existence of my body in its natural form did not lie within this accepted bound

of female body physiology and I was regularly made aware that I did not belong because of it. While I was publicly humiliated in front of my peers by educators, I noticed that fairer-skinned girls and cisgender males were able to mostly avoid this level of scrutiny and policing, despite being out of compliance with the dress code more frequently. Because of these negative interactions about my body and the underlying message behind the policing of my clothing, I was made to believe that my body was a distraction and that I should hide it underneath many layers of clothing to prevent unwanted attention or scrutiny from those in positions of authority and power.

Another memory I recall pertained to my complexion as a darker-skinned girl, and I will attribute this experience as one that shaped my racial awareness. During a summer trip where I stayed with an extended family relative, I was told by to stay out of the sun repeatedly because I would get darker. In this context, the concern for the darkness of my skin was not borne from a desire to protect me from sunburn or the cancerous effects of UV radiation; the underlying message was that darker skin was undesirable and that extreme caution should be taken to ensure that I did not become any darker than I already was. As a result, I stopped playing outdoors during the summer around the age of 10 and began staring longingly at the skin-bleaching products in the beauty supply store when my mother and I would visit. According to Bacon & Lalvani (2019) “through stories, discourses, and activities, we can either accept dominant cultural narratives or exercise agency by rejecting them, and in doing so, come to author ourselves” (p. 387). As I grew older, I began to feel more confident and comfortable in my body as a darker-skinned Black woman and intentionally balked at many of these colorist ideologies which restrict the bodies of darker-skinned individuals to statuses of “undesirable” or “ugly” by most of mainstream society.

A final experience within my identity pertained to my disability as a twice-exceptional student. Twice exceptional students are those who are both eligible for talented and gifted programming and special education support services. I am an individual with ADHD with gifts in receptive language, written expression, and reading comprehension. Unfortunately, my giftedness often masked my disability, making teachers and family members less likely to consider the scaffolds and supports which might aid my learning disability and more likely to attribute blame or use deficit thinking to contextualize my academic habits and behaviors. According to Lee (2015), “because of a lifetime of conditioning by social institutions like the media, church, and schools — we harbor unconscious biases that influence our judgments about people's character, ability, and potential”. A common theme on my report cards often described me as a child with tremendous academic potential, but would criticize my tendency to daydream, lose materials, and low homework submission rates.

While many of these educators were certainly well-intentioned, their biased perceptions about children with ADHD made school life positively miserable for me. According to Bacon & Lalvani (2015), “teachers continue to be skeptical about the need to address the topic of disability in their classrooms, and that, in the absence of meaningful curricula and pedagogy, [allows] negative assumptions about disability and ableist beliefs [to] persist”. Many educators would refuse to allow me to turn in late work because I was admitted into the International Baccalaureate program. In their minds, a child who had made it to that level of academic achievement and challenge should not require additional academic supports. These experiences left me with anxiety and depression related to school and have been instrumental in how I approach this work for students with disabilities.

My cultural identity has had great implications for both my teaching and my students' learning. One such impact that my cultural identity has had on my teaching is present in the

literature I select for my classroom library and within the curriculum I teach as a literacy teacher. I regularly consider my experiences being excluded and unwelcome because of my identity when considering the instructional decisions that I make. For example, when selecting books for both areas, I consider the lived experiences and cultural backgrounds of my students and whether those identities are present in the texts I have selected for the unit and within my classroom library books. As a child, I rarely found texts about Black girls or children with disabilities like mine, which led me to feel alone and invisible. According to Bacon and Lalvani (2015), “not all stories are equally acknowledged, affirmed, or valued; some stories are upheld and reified by power structures, while others must “fight tenaciously to be heard”. It is my role as an educator to ensure that the lived experiences of my diverse classroom are affirmed and valued, therefore, it is my duty to select culturally responsive and relevant texts to ensure that my students do not need to fight to be seen or heard in our classroom curriculum. Because I find genuine opportunities to celebrate and center the cultures and heritages of the students I teach, my classroom has become a safe, welcoming, and affirming community where students are unashamed to be themselves, speak their truths, and advocate for their needs. Professional development opportunities in my district have allowed me to find culturally relevant lesson plans and materials that have allowed me to coach my colleagues in these areas during our Professional Learning Communities (PLC’s). According to Minero (2019), “a lack of professional development on how to address issues and bullying has left teachers ill-equipped to establish inclusive cultures”. When teachers receive training “so they can coach their colleagues on topics like embracing family diversity and preventing bias-based bullying”, it creates a safe place for learning to thrive in their classrooms (Minero, 2019). As a result, my students regularly exceed their reading growth targets on a yearly basis and typically experience anywhere between 1.5 and 3 years of reading growth in a school year.

As I reflect upon this self-study process and the role that my identity has had upon my teaching practice and its impact upon student learning, I would like to take the following next steps. Firstly, as a teacher leader within my school building, I would like to formalize our school's stances on diversity and identity with our administrative team. According to Minero (2018), "We say students need to see visible signs of a safe space, but educators also need to know that their administration supports them and will have their back if a parent or community member with anti-LGBTQ views complains". To ensure that teachers in the building feel empowered and supported in validating the diverse experiences in their classrooms, it is important that they know that the administration will unconditionally support them in situations where they are being targeted by members of the community which may not share our sentiments towards equality and justice for all. Another change I will implement based on this experience is to encourage my students to analyze character identities like race, ability, and gender in our literary analyses to combat ideas like colorblindness. According to Nobel (2012), "racial colorblindness is a social convention that many Americans start to internalize by as young as age 10". Considering my role as a 5th grade educator of children between the ages of 10 and 11, it is crucial that I play an active role in dismantling these pervasive attitudes within my classroom. Finally, I will consider the idea that "what is spoken and unspoken matters" (Lee, 2015). In my classroom, the historical perspectives I teach in social studies should teach children to consider whose perspectives are not being heard or acknowledged and the implication that invisibility has upon our perceptions of historical events, such as Westward Expansion, the Civil War, and World War I.

References

- Bacon, J.K. & Lalvani, P. (2019, October 9). Dominant narratives, subjugated knowledges, and the righting of the story of disability in K-12 curricula. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 49(4), 387-404.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2019.1656990>
- Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching & the brain*. Corwin.
- Lee, K. (2015, August 20). *Can you escape bias?* Psychology Today.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/reset-247/201508/can-you-escape-bias>
- Minero, E. (2018, April 19). *Schools struggle to support LGBTQ students*. Edutopia.
<https://www.edutopia.org/article/schools-struggle-support-lgbtq-students>
- Nobel, C. (2012, February 13). The case against racial colorblindness. Harvard Business School Working Knowledge. <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6919.html>