

## Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Four Questions A Conceptual Map – Vic Diaz and Jay Henry

Culturally responsive teaching is a well-developed theoretical and practical perspective on teaching, learning and schooling, yet the research suggests several different useful frameworks for mapping this concept. After thoughtful deliberation and several different attempts to use different conceptual maps, we have arrived at using Teach For America's Four Questions for Leadership Development to situate our understanding of culturally responsive teaching.

### The Four Questions for Leadership Development

The Four Questions for Leadership Development capture the personal capacities for lifelong leadership that we aim to develop in our corps members. These capacities are organized in the following four questions:

- WHAT are we trying to accomplish?
- HOW do I lead?
- WHO is at the center of this work?
- WHY do I lead?

Note that none of our four core questions exist in a vacuum. This is to say that our pursuit of our answers to these four questions should not happen in isolation, but we should rather seek a synthesis of our relationships, our motivations, our vision, and our strengths to help fuel our life's direction.

We use the four fundamental questions to organize the concepts related to culturally responsive teaching and critical pedagogy for a few reasons. First, what we seek to describe here is as much a perspective, as is a tool. In other words, culturally responsive teaching and critical pedagogy describe ways to think about education rather than just a collection of best practices that "work" in schools. Second, the four questions are intentionally values-based and thus align well to an understanding of culturally responsive teaching and critical pedagogy as a series of values in education. Finally, culturally responsive teaching and critical pedagogy and responding to the four questions are both highly contextual actions, and depend heavily on the social, cultural, and historical contexts of our work.

In culturally responsive teaching, the WHO question is of utmost importance, as this perspective is driven by the self-interests and self-determination of our students and communities. From there, the WHY question must next be addressed before we consider WHAT work we are engaged in, and HOW we are engaged in it. See below for explanations of responses to these questions from a critically conscious and culturally responsive perspective.

## WHO Are the People Leading This Work?

### **Students, families and communities must be at the center of the theory of change**

Our students and the communities in which we work drive everything that we do in culturally responsive teaching and critical pedagogy. Students, their families, and their community need to be centrally located in the short- and long-term theory of change of our organization. We believe students become agents of change in the world by being critically conscious, culturally competent, academically successful forces of change in their own community.

### **Students must serve as forces of change in their own communities**

Patricia Cejudo was a student in Vic's classroom in San Jose, California and later became the first person in her family to graduate from college. As an undocumented student, the path to and through college was not easy for her. In her own words:

*"The shortage of staff, counselors, and programs made it hard for me to receive information about the requirements for college. Also, I didn't understand that plenty of the staff at these institutions were not fully prepared to understand or guide minorities, low income, and undocumented students. [Mr. Diaz] educated us about our rights as immigrant students, and organized us to better represent our needs and make our voices heard."*

In this class, Patricia participated in a persuasive text unit focused on the DREAM Act, where students read and wrote texts that advocated for the passing of this important piece of legislation. In addition, students participated in an informational text-based unit about college, critically studying the major barriers to higher education in their lives and the ways in which they could not only clear these barriers, but eliminate them for the next generation.

In addition to earning her bachelor's degree from San Jose State University, Patricia has recently applied for Deferred Action, which will allow her to earn legal residency in the United States, and the right to work through receiving a work permit. More importantly, she says, "I have become a stronger and better prepared student activist and keep fighting for the rights of my community, as well as educating them for much more effective mobilization." One organization Patricia works closely with was recently awarded the "Community Impact Award" by a local organization during a banquet recognizing community leaders in San Jose, and Patricia works tirelessly to organize, educate, and mobilize her community of DREAMers in San Jose.

### **Students must navigate the two worlds of school and home**

First generation college students know all too well the complexity of navigating their identities at school and home. With respect to language, dress, customs, and culture, students find themselves trapped in a world where who they are at home and who they are at school pull them in two different directions.

Culturally responsive teachers bring this tension into their classroom, and make navigating this tension a primary goal for their students. Yet, they push themselves and their students to navigate this tension in a way that affirms their cultural heritage and background, rather than naively pushing their kids to assimilate to a cultural or social norm that may render their background invisible or inferior.

## WHY Do I Lead?

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Pedagogy trouble the way in which we ask this question. On the one hand, the reason why we engage in this work as teachers speaks to the power of education and our work with students. On the other hand, placing students, their families, and the community at the center of our work challenges us to think critically about what we mean by "lead."

### **The achievement gap is an intentional social construct**

Understanding the social, cultural and historical context of educational inequity, we understand that the achievement gap is an intentional social construction. The founder of the Center for Anti-Oppressive Teaching, Dr. Kevin Kumashiro, explains, "From its history of differentiating education by race, to its current system of unequal funding by district, the education system has worked to disadvantage certain groups, accumulating an 'education debt' that makes the achievement gap inevitable." He borrows the term "education debt" from Culturally Responsive Teaching pioneer and advocate Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, who describes the ways in which the history of social and cultural arrangements in schools has actively disadvantaged certain groups while simultaneously advantaging other groups through the same policies and arrangements. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the history of Native American Education described by American Indian Studies professor Dr. K. Tsianina Lomawaima who tells us, "The history of American Indian education can be summarized in three simple words: struggle for power."

### **Education is a "struggle for power" and liberation**

Based on our understanding of the work of Paulo Freire and other critical pedagogues, we believe that schools and education can be re-cast as a process of liberation. In addition, whose culture is recognized and affirmed in school and whose is not speaks to who has power in school and who does not. In this struggle for power, we also struggle over using schools as sites of social reproduction versus sites of social transformation based on freedom and liberation. However, Freire also reminds us that freedom can not be gifted from one group to another.

## **Freedom and liberty cannot be gifted from one group to another**

Our understanding of this foundational question is tricky. On the one hand, we lead because we believe schools are sites of cultural production and can be re-cast as sources of liberation. On the other hand, we know we can not simply give this freedom to our students, and that ultimately, as Freire says, "Freedom is acquired by conquest, not gift." Thus, the question of WHO and WHY go hand in hand in this perspective, as we seek to carve out a pedagogy where students lead their own fight for freedom and liberation through the education they participate in at school.

## **WHAT Are We Trying To Accomplish?**

Ladson-Billings describes three outcomes for Culturally Responsive Teaching: "Students must experience academic success, students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order."

### **Academic Achievement**

We know that academic achievement and educational attainment will open doors in our students' life trajectories, so we work to ensure that our students earn increased access to spaces in the world that have been historically denied to them. Yet, we want to ensure students have a sense of identity and purpose as they enter those spaces. Their identity comes from their ability to develop or maintain their own cultural competence.

### **Cultural Competence**

Cultural competence has two parts. First, students must understand their own cultural identity, and grow to love and appreciate who they are and where they come from. Ladson-Billings calls this "cultural integrity" that can be a strong "vehicle for learning." Additionally, Cornel West tells us that deep love for one's own roots can eventually lead to "spillover love," where unconditional love for self becomes unconditional love for others. Yet, their ability to love themselves and love others depends on their own critical understanding of the world around them, so critical consciousness becomes a central aspect of any pursuit of culturally responsive teaching and critical capacity.

### **Critical Consciousness**

The idea of critical consciousness has roots that reach as far back as Plato's *Apology*, when Socrates tells us "The unexamined life is not worth living." Freire tells us this examination must be critical, in that it considers power, power structures, and power dynamics in their social, cultural and historical contexts and trajectories. Power doesn't happen in a vacuum; it has an arrangement, a history, and a destination. We know our students have to understand these arrangements of power and their designated places within these systems if they are ever to exact agency over these arrangements.

The aforementioned example of Patricia Cejudo's progression from being unaware of her rights as an undocumented student to being an advocate and community organizer for immigrant rights shows this concept well, as do the histories and biographies of most of the change agents from whom we most draw strength and hope in our struggle for justice and equity.

## HOW do we lead?

Given the importance of context in responding to each of the four questions, this is a particular difficult question to address. Culturally responsive teaching and critical pedagogy are more of a perspective than a tool, so they are much more than a set of best practices or an understanding of “what works.” That said, the research still points to sites of action at several levels. While these are not discreet actions, they are certainly helpful categories in thinking about the actions we take.

**At the classroom level**, culturally responsive teaching lives in four places:

- Curriculum: What teachers teach/what students learn
- Pedagogy: How teachers teach/how students learn
- Relationships Between Teachers, Students, Families, and the Community

**At the teacher level**, teachers become culturally responsive through their development of six dispositions described in the book Educating Culturally Responsive Teachers. In this influential book, authors Ana Maria Villegas and Tamara Lucas explain that culturally responsive teachers hold the following dispositions:

<b>Sociocultural Consciousness</b>	
Definition:	Contrasted By:
Awareness of multiple perspectives on the world, reflecting a person’s race, class, gender, etc.	One’s worldview is universal and not reflective of race, class, gender, etc.
Understanding that any hierarchy is due to uneven power arrangements; not inherent superiority.	Belief that power is based on meritocracy or inherent superiority.
<b>Affirmative Attitude Towards Cultural Difference</b>	
Definition:	Contrasted By:
ALL cultures are valid, and greater status of White, middle class is derived from power, not superiority	White, middle class culture is inherently superior and the legitimate standard for U.S. society and institutions.
Ways of thinking, talking, and behaving that differ from norm are valid. Differences are opportunities to learn, and need to be respected and affirmed.	Deficit Orientation: Ways of thinking, talking, and behaving that differ from the norm are inherently inferior. Differences are a problem.
<b>Constructivist Approach to Teaching &amp; Learning</b>	
Definition:	Contrasted By:
Knowledge is a social construction, influenced by experience, and values-based. School knowledge must be based on social and cultural knowledge.	Knowledge is transmitted, independent of the learner, waiting to be discovered, and neutral. School knowledge is fixed, agreed upon and privileged over other knowledge.
Learning is an active process: Students connect new and prior experience to create knowledge. Teachers build	Learning is a passive act: Students are empty receptacles and teachers transmit knowledge to students. Priority is

knowledge with students, with emphasis on dialogue.	given to coverage and standardization.
<b>Knowledge of Student Prior Knowledge/Builds Instruction Off of Student Prior Knowledge</b>	
<b>Definition:</b>	<b>Contrasted By:</b>
Constantly actively learning about students, their families, their community, their experiences, and their relationship towards subject matter.	Finite or no knowledge of students' lives outside of schools. Priority given to content and subject matter, rather than students.
Design instruction around what students already know academically, culturally and socially. Instruction builds on strengths, interests and "funds of knowledge."	No consideration for social and cultural knowledge and experience in instruction. Instruction is based on content, not "funds of knowledge."
<b>Feels a Capacity and Responsibility to be Culturally Responsive</b>	
<b>Definition:</b>	<b>Contrasted By:</b>
Teachers as agents of change. Teaching is a political and ethical activity towards promoting equity and justice. Actions are never neutral.	Teachers as technicians. Teaching as just methods and instruction. Role of teacher is to impart knowledge and maintain objectivity.
Schools reproduce social inequalities by privileging dominant culture. However, schools can serve as sites of social transformation.	Schools are neutral, apolitical, and meritocratic.

**At the staff level**, the people who train, support and develop teachers must also hold these dispositions as they create programming and learning opportunities for their teachers.