Chapter 7

Strength-Based Approaches to Meeting Culturally Diverse Student Needs

Rose M. Ylimaki and Lynnette A. Brunderman

Abstract A strengths-based approach to education is essential for successful school development in culturally diverse schools. Chapter 7 reflects that education lies in the pedagogical relations and provocations into the self-realizations and growth of young people. In this arena, provocation refers to intentions to provoke thoughts, ideas, and actions that help students to learn and grow. A provocation should be grounded in the child's cultural background strengths. We explicitly worked with school teams to *recognize* the equal value of different cultures in their students' ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and to lead in culturally responsive ways with regards to pedagogy, curriculum, data-analysis, education and community engagement. We drew on research to include positive perspectives of parents and families, communication of high expectations, learning within the context of culture, student-centered and culturally mediated instruction, reshaping the curriculum, and teacher as facilitator. Thus, culturally relevant teaching requires teachers to embrace diversity, build on strengths, and recognize that students learn in a variety of ways. It is the job of the leader to help teachers gain an understanding of those cultures, and how to incorporate that into their classrooms. Sample activities and case studies expand the concepts.

Keywords Culturally responsive pedagogy · Culturally responsive leadership · Funds of knowledge

"...we have somebody in Navajo enrichment class in kindergarten, first, and second and third grade. And we have a teacher who taught in kindergarten and has an aide in the classroom and they were both Navajo, Native Americans, and they would teach the language and culture infused into the core, into the curriculum. And, the same with kinder. And in 2nd grade, we have a Navajo teacher who is not as competent, or feels as capable of teaching

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the language or the culture. We have a foster grandparent who is there every day for seven hours that helps with her and so, even though that foster grandparent doesn't have the certification, she...knows the language and the culture... She can reinforce skills using the culture and the language of the standards...And so, it's not just the principal of the school. It's the facilitators, the paraprofessionals, it's the anybody who touches the child in their educational career has that capacity of having that. And, you have to help build that within them."
-Principal

A strengths-based approach to education is essential for successful school development in culturally diverse schools. As noted in Chap. 6 and elsewhere, education lies in the pedagogical relations and provocations into the self-realizations and growth of young people. Here, provocation in educational literature refers to intentions to provoke thoughts, ideas, and actions that can help to expand on a thought, project, idea or interest. A provocation can come in many different forms, but it is always intended to provoke thoughts, ideas, or actions that extend current thinking, interests, and ideas. Pedagogical relations and interventions or provocations are grounded in recognition (Taylor, 2004) of the child's cultural background strengths or funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2006). Recognition in this sense means that the teacher recognizes or sees all features of each student and the strengths of these features for teaching and learning.

Moll et al. (1992) and González et al. (2005) reflect the notion of recognition through a research project that helped classroom teachers understand and acquire knowledge about families within their communities. Specifically, Moll et al. (1992) conducted a collaborative ethnographic study of the classroom and household practices of working-class Mexican-American families in Arizona. The authors defined the key term, *funds of knowledge*, as the skills and knowledge that have been historically and culturally developed to enable an individual or household to function within a given culture, and argue that integrating *funds of knowledge* into classroom activities creates a richer and more highly-scaffolded learning experience for students. Research findings from this study (Moll et al., 1992, p. 132–141) include:

1. Families have abundant knowledge that programs can learn and use in their family engagement efforts.
2. Students bring with them *funds of knowledge* from their homes and communities that can be used for concept and skill development.
3. Classroom practices sometimes underestimate or constrain what children are able to display intellectually.
4. Teachers should focus on helping students find meaning in activities rather than learn rules and facts.
5. Group discussions around race and class should promote trust and encourage dialogue.

Gloria Ladson-Billings also argues that culture is central to teaching and learning (i.e. pedagogical relations and provocations); it plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals. As she put it, pedagogy that recognizes and celebrates diverse cultures offers equity and access to education for all students (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

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

A number of scholars have recently applied principles of culturally responsive teaching to leadership (e.g. Horsford et al., 2011; Johnson, 2006; Johnson, 2014; Scanlan and López, 2014). Johnson (2006) was one of the first to extend the asset-based approach of culturally responsive pedagogy to leadership. Johnson (2006) defined culturally responsive leadership as leadership that involves philosophies, practices, and policies that create inclusive schooling environments for students and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Common practices include (1) emphasizing high expectations for student achievement; (2) incorporating the history, values, and cultural knowledge of students' home communities in the school curriculum; (3) working to develop a critical consciousness among both students and faculty to challenge inequities in the larger society; and (4) creating organizational structures at the school and district level that empower students and parents from diverse racial and ethnic communities (Johnson, 2007). Other researchers (e.g. Scheurich, 1998; Johnson, 2006, 2007; Riehl, 2000) identified similar characteristics and practices of culturally responsive leadership.

Horsford, Grosland and Gunn (2011) incorporated antiracist pedagogy and leadership in diverse contexts to create a framework for culturally relevant leadership, including four dimensions: (1) knowledge of the political context; (2) inclusion of a culturally relevant and antiracist pedagogical approach; (3) a personal knowledge of cultural proficiency and challenges to it; and (4) the professional duty to work for educational equity. As Johnson (2014) and others have noted, culturally responsive leadership often overlaps with leadership for social justice approaches, a term that has been prevalent in the U.S. educational leadership literature and focuses on improving the educational experiences and outcomes for all students, particularly those who have been traditionally marginalized in schools. Most recently, Johnson (2014) applied culturally responsive leadership to practices that bridge school and community concerns, advocate for cultural recognition and revitalization, and position educational leaders as advocates for racial equity and community development in diverse neighborhoods (p. 7).

Scanlan and López (2014) agree and add explicit attention to cultural and linguistic diversity. Scanlan and López draw on culturally responsive leadership practices that reduce marginalization and successfully educate what they term the new mainstream of students. Based upon their analysis of the literature, Scanlan and López identified three essential dimensions to effectively educate culturally and linguistically diverse students, including promoting sociocultural integration, cultivating language proficiency, and ensuring academic achievement. They proposed a theory of action that school leadership most effectively creates the learning architecture for successfully educating culturally and linguistically diverse students through an integrated service delivery.

In our project, we explicitly worked with school teams to *recognize* the equal value of different cultures in their students' ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and to lead in culturally responsive ways with regards to pedagogy, curriculum,

data-analysis, education, and community engagement. We drew on the above research to include:

1. Positive perspectives on parents and families - Whether it's an informal chat as the parent brings the child to school or in phone conversations or home visits or through newsletters sent home, teachers and principals can begin a dialogue with family members that can result in learning about each of the families through genuine communication (Nieto, 1996; Moll et al., 1992).
2. Communication of high expectations- All students should receive the consistent message that they are expected to attain high standards in their school work, and this message must be delivered by all that are involved in students' academic lives including teachers, guidance counselors, administrators (Horsford et al., 2011). Teachers and others should understand the students' behavior in light of the norms of the communities in which they have grown.
3. Learning within the context of culture – The increasing diversity in our schools, the ongoing demographic changes across the nation and the movement towards globalization dictate that we develop a more in-depth understanding of culture if we want to bring about true understanding among diverse populations (Wilson-Portuondo, 2002). People from different cultures learn in different ways. Their expectations for learning may be different. For example, students from some cultural groups prefer to learn in cooperation with others, while the learning style of others is to work independently.
4. Student-centered instruction - In our multicultural society, culturally responsive teaching reflects democracy at its highest level (Dewey, 1916). It means doing whatever it takes to ensure that every child is achieving and ever moving toward realizing her or his potential. Here learning is a socially mediated process whereby children develop self-realization and autonomy by interacting with both adults and more knowledgeable peers. These interactions allow students to hypothesize, experiment with new ideas, and receive feedback. Here it is also important to create classroom projects that involve the community and its resources.
5. Culturally mediated instruction - Ongoing multicultural activities within the classroom engender a natural awareness of cultural history, values and contributions (Severian-Wilmeth, 2002; Moll et al., 1992; Scanlan and López, 2014; Johnson, 2006). Instruction is culturally mediated when it incorporates and integrates diverse ways of knowing, understanding, and representing information. Instruction and learning take place in an environment that encourages multicultural viewpoints and allows for inclusion of knowledge that is relevant to the students. Learning happens in culturally appropriate social situations; that is pedagogical relations and human relationships among teachers and students are congruent with students' cultures (Hollins, 1996).
6. Reshaping the curriculum - Schools must take a serious look at their curriculum, pedagogy, retention, and tracking policies, testing, hiring practices, and all other policies and practices that create a school climate that is either empowering or disempowering for those who work there (Nieto, 1996). The curriculum should

be meaningful and student-centered as well as aligned to cultural aims and interests (state versions of Common Core). Here Nieto and others recommend using resources other than textbooks for study, developing learning activities that are more reflective of students' backgrounds, and developing integrated units around universal themes.

7. Teacher as facilitator – Teachers should develop a learning environment that is relevant to and reflective of their students' social, cultural, and linguistic experiences. They act as guides, mediators, consultants, instructors, and advocates for the students, helping to effectively connect their culturally- and community-based knowledge to the classroom learning experiences (Scanlan and López, 2014). Ladson-Billings (1995) adds that a key criterion for culturally relevant teaching is nurturing and supporting competence in both home and school cultures. Teachers should use the students' home cultural experiences as a foundation upon which to develop knowledge and skills. Content learned in this way is more significant to students and facilitates the transfer of what is learned in school to real-life situations (Padrón et al., 2002; Moll et al., 2006; González et al., 2005).

Culturally relevant teaching, in the simplest terms, requires teachers to embrace diversity, build on strengths, and recognize that students learn in a variety of ways. Building on the knowledge and skills that students bring from their home and community cultures provides the hook for students to be able to grow in understanding as they relate what they know to what they are learning. The difficulty comes when teachers are not familiar with the home cultures from which students come. It is the job of leaders to help teachers gain an understanding of those cultures, and how to incorporate that into their classrooms.

Application

In order to legitimately address culturally responsive pedagogy, individuals must first be willing to talk about race and culture, and confront their own inherent biases. This is uncomfortable for most people. Jack Mezirow (1997) discusses transformative learning in adults, and how that occurs. As humans, we all have core beliefs and basic assumptions that grow out of our experience, culture and the way we were raised. These are most often unconscious, and as long as things that happen around us or learning in which we engage fit into this framework, we do not question it. It is only when something does not fit well into our personal framework that we seek to understand in different ways. Mezirow (1997) suggests that we transform our learning when we question our own centrality of experience, our frame of reference, through critical self-reflection on our own assumptions (and the assumptions of others) and rational discourse with others in order to arrive at collective understandings. When challenged about your beliefs, values and assumptions, at a below-conscious level it can often be interpreted as challenging your identity, and

can result in the fight-flight response. Another key piece to this process is affirmation; affirmation can help to separate identity from evidence and facts. At the core of this type of learning is centrality of relationship.

Thus, when approaching culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. with adults, it was important to help them self-reflect and feel comfortable discussing these issues and how they impact schooling. First, each individual was asked to reflect on their own biases and assumptions by completing a worksheet, identifying key factors from their personal backgrounds that shaped the way they see the world. These included gender, generational, culture, personal style, sexual orientation, family background/values, professional experience and race/ethnicity. Then in their teams (with whom they had built a trusting relationship) they discussed their own biases/assumptions as well as any they may have heard from others about the culture at their own school sites. They were also prompted to identify affirming statements about culture that they may have heard at their schools.

With a partner, participants then explored facets of their own culture, and how, if at all, their own teachers incorporated their culture (or funds of knowledge) into lessons. They were asked to reflect about what it felt like when their culture was not included at school. Finally, participants read about *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al., 1992), discussing what resonated with each individually, what strategies from the article they could incorporate into their own school setting, and how they might bridge the students' *funds of knowledge* with the expectations of the common core standards.

We also used the gender caucus as an activity to explore the way we see the world. Participants self-divided into 2 groups, male and female, and together created a chart answering the question, "What unique needs and challenges do you as a female or male leader have? After sharing with the other group, they then discussed in pairs their perceptions of what biases might come into play if they were coaching each other, as well as how those biases might influence their coaching of others.

Participants were engaged in activities using a variety of cases and scenarios. One example was "A Case Study of a New High School Principal" (Cortez et al., 2012) with its different scenarios for discussion. In small groups, members discussed the issues in the scenario they were given, addressing the question of how schools in the southwest attempt to meet the cultural needs of non-white students. They then discussed how they would have responded as the leader, as well as how the scenarios related to the funds of knowledge concepts, and how the assets of groups or individuals might apply in the scenarios. See Activity Box 7.1 for an example scenario.

Please note that the above activities were not all accomplished in a single meeting, but were spread throughout the project. We came to understand that culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership required an ongoing effort in order to effect lasting change.

Activity Box 7.1: Sample Scenario for Small Group Discussion (Cortez et al. 2012)**Scenario V: *Curricular and Instructional Issues and the Hispanic Culture***

1. A 16-year old “recent immigrant” student enrolls in a predominantly white school system in the southern United States. The student has a fair command of the English language but to help support his family, the student has decided to work in a recently opened Mexican food restaurant across the thoroughfare from the high school he attends. As a result of his work schedule, he is missing numerous classes. To what extent do schools in the United States attempt to understand the culture and experiences of Hispanic students and their families most notably when it comes to teaching, learning, and scheduling of classes? To what extent do the schools in the southwest attempt to meet the cultural needs of Hispanic students through specialized courses, programs, and scheduling adaptations to include the Hispanic culture in the curriculum?
2. Salvador Vargas is a recent Hispanic immigrant who, along with his family, fled Mexico for the safety and security of the United States and for greater educational and career opportunities. Salvador wants to be a civil engineer. In Mexico, Salvador was an honor student in his high school. Today, Salvador attends Sun Valley High School in a major metropolitan city in the Midwest. A growing pocket of immigrant Hispanics have moved to the northwest side of town, where they have found work, homes, and security. At Sun Valley High School, Salvador is immediately placed into remedial coursework even though he was an outstanding student in his homeland community of Puerto Escondido, Mexico. Salvador is highly intelligent in all academic areas but especially in mathematics and the sciences. He is eager to succeed, ambitious in his goals, and ready to enroll in Advanced Placement coursework at the high school. However, his command of the English language is limited.

Salvador’s counselor, Mildred Dunn, has problems communicating with him as do other counselors or teachers because they are not fluent in Spanish. Ms. Dunn has referred him for testing to determine his level of cognitive ability. After parental consent has been given, a bilingual school diagnostician administered a cognitive evaluation to establish his general intellectual ability and an achievement test to determine his present level of performance. Both tests were administered in his native language because IDEA mandates that a student must be tested in his native language or nonverbally. Salvador’s scores reveal that achievement and cognitive scores were in the average range. Based on the results of the assessment, Ms. Dunn places Salvador in the regular general education curriculum core courses with ESL and remedial services (tutoring) support.

(continued)

Activity Box 7.1 (continued)

Interestingly, while Salvador cannot complete the class work at school, he has a brother-in-law at home that speaks English and who is willing to help him with translating the class work and other assignments. When Salvador brings the work back to class, his teachers generally deduct points from the work exclaiming to one another: “You know it’s not his work. Someone else is doing the work for him. Just look at his grades. They are exceptional. Most of these Mexican students are low achieving and lazy. There is no way he can do this work on his own!”

How relevant to the culture and experiences of Hispanic students is the curriculum adopted in schools across the nation, especially in quick growing Hispanic population pockets? Consider Hispanic immigrant students, such as Salvador, who may experience language barriers, or have instructional issues such as grade retention, ability grouping, and the over-identification of learning disabilities resulting in Special Education placement. How do these practices affect Hispanic immigrant students in U.S. schools? What must principals, teachers, and counselors in predominantly White communities do to meet the instructional, curricular, and academic needs of students such as Salvador? What about the attitudes exhibited in the teacher conversations in the scenario? Are these conversations realistic assessments of the students being described? Do people really think and talk as is quoted in the scenario?

Lessons Learned

We found that schools needed much more work on cultural responsiveness, thus we will share only one case that illustrated both progress and a consciousness about the importance of cultural responsiveness for ongoing school development.

Case A: *Santo Domingo Mission School*

Santo Domingo Mission School is located in southern Arizona on reservation lands. With a student population K-8 of approximately 90% Native students, 6% Hispanic students and 4% Other students, Santo Domingo Mission School has been serving the community for more than 150 years. The free and reduced lunch rate hovers between 83% and 87%. Many students live in a single parent home or reside with a relative; approximately 10% of the school population are in foster care, resulting in a high rate of transiency. Many students travel an hour to school, resulting in a high tardy and absence rate. To combat this, the school provides a bus for about 40% of their students, but on days when the bus breaks down, about half of those students are unable to get to school at all. A private parochial school, they rely on the

community for donations in order to operate. In 2000 they were able to launch a capital campaign that allowed them to expand from 4 classrooms to their current 11 classrooms.

The principal, Shelly Kerr, had been at the school for 10 years. Understanding that she was an outsider to this community without deep cultural understanding, she sought to build trusting relationships quickly and learn about the assets of the community as well as the needs. A white female, Principal Kerr describes her challenge when starting at the site:

“...one of the things that you have to know when you’re out there is one year is not enough for them to feel comfortable with you. Two years is not enough. I got my first hug at six years...so they’re not going to trust someone that was kind of pushed on them, which is how I came into being...It’s a pretty interesting dynamic that goes on, but the more and the longer that I’m there, the more confidence they have so they pretty much feel like they can say anything.”

Mrs. Kerr talks about communication with the school community.

“Trying to get into that community is very, very difficult, so you have to work constantly on your relationships. How you deal with one person in a negative manner is going to get out to the entire village (and so the community is called a village) and so you had to be careful about that; you had to be careful about little things...word of mouth, ...everybody knows what’s going on at the school.”

Mrs. Kerr also understands that students have more to offer than what might appear initially to someone who does not understand the community dynamics.

“Any stranger coming in, maybe even a speaker to talk, especially to my big kids, they are silent, so silent, and I always have to assure them, these guys are not silent, they talk non-stop, or giggle non-stop, you just don’t see it. If they don’t know you, there’s nothing. You won’t get anything out of them.”

Recognizing that diabetes affects about 50% of the native population, Shelly describes some efforts at school to help combat that.

“We do employ a full time RN at the school, which does seem necessary for the...people; they have the highest rate of diabetes in the world. The likelihood of a student who is Native American getting diabetes is 50% at this time, so we take that very seriously in what we provide for them in food and in physical activity. So they do have...PE and they do have...a no sit recess. They have a lap that they have to go every time they go out (it’s a quarter mile); they walk the lap...or run, depending on their age and what they want to do, but they can’t sit down, they can’t come out, and [say] ‘oh, I’m so tired’, ‘well, get up and walk around; I know that, I’ve been sitting all day too.’”

Santo Domingo Mission School provides a safe place for students to do homework after school, requiring their athletes to attend prior to practice. Principal Kerr also talks about the school as a safe place for students who bring issues from home or the community. Although bullying is considered an issue around the reservation, it is not typical at this school. She describes her approach:

“There are times when I have to do counseling with students and their behavior when I know that it’s something that happened off campus and they’re bringing it on campus, and we just talk about how our campus is a safe place; we don’t do those things at the school and this is your school, and this is how I would be saying it to them, ‘this is your school; is that some-

thing that you want in your school? Do you want someone disrespecting you like that?', and boom, they step up to the plate and it doesn't happen again. We really are very lucky, [bullying]...doesn't happen in our school on a regular basis because we jump on it and we call it what it is. So, if I am talking to a student I ask them, 'would you like to be called a bully? Your actions could be seen as that, and if I talk to your parent about that, what do you think they would think?' And boom, it just stops. It's the reality that you can't hide anything; you need to take care of each of these different things in this particular community. I think it would have to help in any community, but it's been really successful. I mean, I don't have graffiti in the bathroom, I don't have graffiti anywhere. When they graffitied the mission really badly a few months ago, they didn't touch the school. Why didn't they touch the school? We're right next door. You know, they touched the plaza, that was 100 feet further than we are, but they didn't touch the school, they touched the graveyard which was all the way down the road, why didn't they touch the school? It's because we are building this culture of respect at the school.

Santo Domingo Mission School recognizes the importance of building relationships with students and their families as the basis for being culturally responsive. They seek to build on the assets that the students bring while emphasizing academic achievement. The principal and staff recognize that they could do more, and continue to work with their community.

Final Thoughts

A focus on culturally responsive pedagogy within a school is predicated on the willingness of all staff members to confront their own biases (and each other), to build relationships with students, families and communities, and to work from an asset-based mindset rather than a deficit-based outlook to build upon the *funds of knowledge* in the students and community. To do this, it is vital to learn about the community and its assets; this is the basis for education. Knowing the strengths, however, is meaningless from an education standpoint unless those assets are utilized in educational relationships - curriculum, pedagogy, critical thinking, reflection for a democratic way of living. In most schools across the U.S., there is much work to be done in this area. We have only touched the surface.

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