

Culturally Responsive Teaching: From Individual Classrooms to Schoolwide Action

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a first-hand account of the author's experience realizing that her high school science students, many of whom were students of color, were not engaged in learning in her classes and how she learned about and put into practice more culturally sustaining and relevant pedagogies.

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS (2nd Edition) ADDRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE:

1. A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.
3. A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.

Introduction

It's hard to admit you are wrong, and it is especially hard to realize you have biases in your teaching. This was my realization. I noticed my teaching practices were leaving many grade-level high school students disconnected, disengaged, and unresponsive. Sound familiar? The journey that followed this realization resulted in a career-altering transformation in my practice. I gained tremendous wisdom and compassion for others, but it wasn't easy—and, fortunately, it didn't stop with me.

As a result of lessons in the Fall 2019 "Introduction to Diversity" class at the [University of South Carolina](#) and participation in the [Professional Development Schools \(PDS\)](#) focus group at my school, I began to notice the students who were disengaged in my classroom were students of color. I realized that even with the best intentions, I was marginalizing students. I did not see my implicit bias, until one day...I did.

I saw that implicit bias validated some students while oppressing others. I saw the vulnerabilities of children whose identities were not validated by social structures. I saw how easy it is to believe the message of student deficiency and to normalize inequality. I wanted to do something about injustice—something that was in my power to do. I looked at myself and my classroom, and I began my own personal battle to combat this message so often communicated in schools across the country and that subsequently problematize inequality.

You see, as a white heterosexual female educator, I have never been told I could not do something because of the color of my skin or my sexual orientation. Even though I am a woman, my white identity has always been validated by structures in place. That gave me confidence, agency, and privilege.

My identity is not to blame. This is a societal problem where social signals reward some identities over others (Howard, 2010). However, with a little bit of effort on my part, in a short amount of time, I was able to break down some barriers for many students in my classroom through reflection and action. I began shifting my practice toward providing a more equitable classroom. I began looking for opportunities to include diverse cultures in classroom materials, dismantle impediments for diverse students, and create safe spaces to talk about sensitive, uncomfortable subjects like race and gender.

I had great successes with small changes such as providing more choice, co-creating culture projects with my classes, including students in classroom decisions, and sharing controversial topics associated with race and gender. As though I had sprinkled magic engagement dust throughout my classroom, disengaged students began to participate, complete their work, and influence others to do the same.

I saw students who had not turned in much work finishing their assignments early and being eager to present to the class. I heard kids say things like, "I've always been terrible at science," start to see themselves as scientists. I saw increased self-confidence in science coursework for many diverse students. What I learned was that by being interested in learning more about my students' cultures and deliberately valuing and including it in classroom materials and assignments, diverse student groups became interested in me and what I was trying to teach them.

James (pseudonym) stopped disrupting my class daily and started contributing. This once combative student suddenly began to pull his desk to the front of the room to ensure he didn't miss anything. Because of the multiple changes that occurred in my classroom over that first semester, one particular adaptation does not stand out to account for this shift in James's actions.

It was likely the combination of my choice to handle the disruptions confidentially and on my own without involving administration; explicitly speaking to his ability and positively about his identity as a black male; and the focus on building quality relationships. He knew where I stood and that place was as a supportive classroom member who just wanted him to be successful. This gave me an in to have the conversation with him about how distracted he was in class because of his cousin. That is when he started removing himself from the distractions by pulling his desk front and center. I helped him to recognize barriers in the classroom and to my astonishment he listened. He shifted from a distracted and disruptive student to a focused and engaged leader in the classroom.

Beyond Just Me

The impact of cultural inclusion did not stop with my classroom. The PDS structures in place provided an arena to share my transition with seven other educators in the 2019-20 PDS focus group at my school. Equity and cultural inclusion became the focal point of our conversations. In addition, cultural responsiveness became our school-wide goal.

This all happened before the coronavirus changed everything. When the revelation of inequities swept across our nation in the spring and summer of 2020, we were already working to combat injustice at our school.

In the spring of 2020, the PDS focus group decided to find a book focused on culturally responsive teaching practices geared toward application in the classroom. We decided on Sharroky Hollie's (2018) *Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching and Learning*. Of all the books available, we felt this book was most representative of best practices in the classroom for culturally responsive teaching.

The 2020-21 school year saw a 200% increase in participation in the PDS focus group, as 16 more teachers joined. Among the 24 of us participating in the book study are teachers in every content area committed to adapting our practice to be more culturally responsive to students.

PDS is revolutionizing education through the development of school-university partnerships and the empowerment of teachers. The existing PDS structures are designed to develop innovative programs to help teachers and schools become change agents and problem-solvers. At my school, teachers are awakening the most disengaged students through the interrogation of bias and inclusion of culture. The school-wide focus would not have happened had these PDS structures not been in place.

Yes, but How?

There are several adaptations I made to my classroom to make it a more equitable space for all students, including utilizing a family approach, building quality relationships, including different cultures, and having communal structures. These adaptations are explained below.

Family Approach

Like Gallagher (2016) discusses, I now approach issues in the same way an ideal, functional family would deal with problems. I hold the same expectations for my students that I do for my own children. If there are students experiencing challenges, they know we will work together until we reach a solution. Students need to hear that belief they can do it, so I give them multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery and learn. In addition, I attempt to handle issues that arise by using a supportive family model, which means handling it internally with a caring

approach. If there is a conflict, I try to resolve it with the student first to maintain confidentiality. This builds trust and lets them know they are important to our classroom. I do not call administration for small offenses. Another aspect of our classroom family is a buddy system, as discussed by [Ladson-Billings](#) (1995). Students have a buddy in the class for whom they are responsible. This builds peer social support and ultimately makes the classroom feel like a big family.

Relationships

I prioritize developing a relationship with every student that extends beyond academics. This might mean participating in a few TikTok dances and learning a few handshakes. This level of engagement grants me access to real conversations about students' lives, goals, and the role of education, and the relationships we form gives me leverage to challenge them as learners, drawing on the importance of relationships as highlighted in the work of Howard (2013), Milner (2011), and Johnson (2011).

Cultural Inclusion

I use every opportunity to include diverse cultures in my classroom. Student work fills the room. Displaying student work communicates that I value students as a member of this classroom and see this as their space (Hollie, 2018). I practice equity by ensuring the images I use on my slides represent multiple identities and my classroom materials are inclusive. I share historical controversies in science surrounding race and gender inequality. We talk about uncomfortable issues. I share personal stories that are related to the content and encourage them to share personal stories, too.

Communal Structure

I relinquish control in my classroom whenever possible. Students are allowed to sit where they want, even if it is on the floor where we have beanbags. Whenever possible, I seek student input for classroom decisions. Some examples are student-created goals, choice in parameters for an assignment, and even order of learning. In addition, I plan opportunities for social interaction through collaborative work. This student-centered orientation of the classroom promotes equally valued perspectives on the content. Emdin (2007) calls this communal structure and suggests the corporate structures of teacher-directed learning and the hyper-structured classroom management of compliance causes diverse students to become disengaged.

Despite these changes in my practice, I still ponder, how many students am I missing? How many students are *we* missing, educators?

I challenge educators and leaders to begin or to continue your own personal journey of interrogating implicit bias. Do not let complacency interfere with student achievement. Inaction is action to reinforce bias. I challenge you to talk about race, gender, and other marginalized identities and their influences on the classroom. Diverse student groups need us to have those conversations, and it is to the benefit of all students when we center all cultures in our classrooms. I challenge you to watch students breathe a sigh of relief and feel safe when you see them and they see you. Mostly, I challenge you to try to incorporate culture in meaningful and authentic ways.

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