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vol. 73 / Spring 2015

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The role of critical reflection



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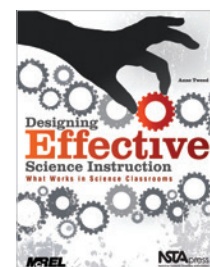
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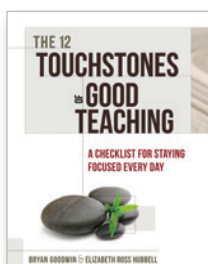
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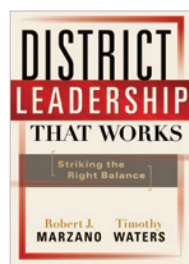
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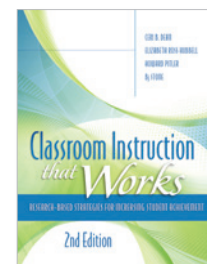
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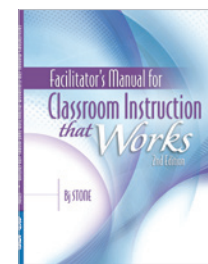
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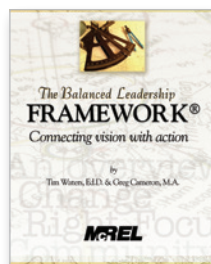
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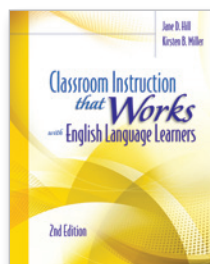
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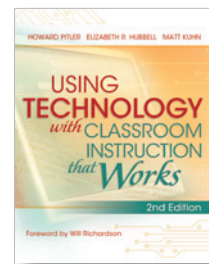
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In this issue

The future is now

Do you remember the first time an English language learner (ELL) walked into your school or classroom? You probably knew little about his or her educational experience, first language, or home country. You may have felt worried or unsure about how you were going to teach a student you knew little about and had difficulty communicating with. Maybe you went to your colleagues or your principal for advice, which may or may not have helped.

These days, it's almost impossible to find a classroom that *doesn't* have ELLs or other diverse learners. A "diverse learner" can also be a student who comes from a disadvantaged background or is part of a cultural group that is different from his or her teacher's.

Since the 1960s and 70s, educators have been thinking about how to restructure schools so that all students learn the skills and knowledge they need to function successfully in a diverse society. The concept of multicultural education grew out of the civil rights movement, and over the years has been connected with and shaped by the women's rights movement, the passage of Title IX, and bilingual education.

Today, multicultural education and its various approaches, including culturally responsive instruction, is mainstream. Dozens of models and frameworks exist. Yet, as student demographics keep changing, achievement gaps persist.

Truly meeting the needs of *all* students is very complex work. Teachers and schools must address issues of language, background knowledge, motivation, engagement, and support. They must find ways to overcome systemic, curricular, and pedagogical impediments to learning.

In this issue of *Changing Schools*, we look at some of these issues, including the importance of teaching academic language; the role of critical self-reflection for teachers; how to use student knowledge and experience to choose the right complex texts; how cultural connections can lead to systemic change in diverse school systems; and how to deal with "stereotype threat."

We hope that these articles, while by no means comprehensive, serve as a reminder that, as researcher Lisa Delpit said, "There is no achievement gap at birth." In other words, there are actions that teachers and administrators can take, together, to improve the odds of success for diverse learners. As we enter a new demographic era—one in which Latino, African-American, and Asian students are now the majority in public schools—the time to act is now. ●



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Text complexity model offers way to better support diverse students

By Susan Ryan



Now that the Common Core State Standards are being implemented in classrooms across the country, many educators are experiencing first-hand how the Common Core's *text complexity model* is playing out in their classrooms. This model, which instills rigor into the English Language Arts (ELA)/Literacy standards, has a strong impact on curriculum, instruction, and assessment and has, therefore, received much attention from educators.

Of particular importance to teachers is the selection of appropriately complex reading material for students. While the model provides guidance on this, much of the work being done to assign particular titles to grades and courses may be overlooking a piece of the model that offers an opportunity to better support the needs of diverse learners: matching readers to texts and tasks. These *reader and task considerations* require teachers to be responsive to the needs of individual students and to their local contexts; in other words, they are inherently tied to students' cultures, backgrounds, and interests.

Reader and task variables form the base of the Common Core text complexity model, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Common Core Text Complexity Model



The Common Core defines the three factors of measuring text complexity as follows:

Qualitative evaluation of the text: Levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands

Quantitative evaluation of the text: Readability measures and other scores of text complexity

Matching reader to text and task: Reader variables (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and task variables (such as purpose and the complexity generated by the task assigned and the questions posed) (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015)

It is within the interplay of readers, texts, and tasks that comprehension takes place, and thus these variables are fundamental to the selection of student reading material. Strategies to address individual readers, however, require differentiation—which may not be easily applied in practice. Using what we know about our students and employing a few key strategies, however, can lead to effective differentiation for all students.

Using reader variables to match diverse learners to text

When matching readers to texts, the Common Core clearly identifies motivation, knowledge, and experience as important considerations.

Motivation. How to motivate students to read has been the topic of much research over the years, and rightly so; the more time students spend reading, the greater their gains in reading comprehension skills (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). So how should we address motivation when selecting reading material for diverse students? Designing flexible projects that allow reading choices is a great place to start.

Having a choice allows students to pursue topics of personal interest, which can increase motivation to read and reading comprehension (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006; Guthrie, Anderson, Alao, & Rinehart, 1999; Wisniewski, Fawcett, Padak, & Rasinski, 2012). Choice empowers students, gives them a genuine purpose for reading, and respects who they are as individuals and as members of a cultural group. Indeed, the Common Core encourages choice for some student reading in its Publisher's Criteria, which states that instructional

materials must “aim to increase regular independent reading of texts that appeal to students’ interests while developing both their knowledge base and joy in reading,” and that teachers should “ensure that all students have daily opportunities to read texts of their choice on their own during and outside of the school day” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4).

Not only should students have the opportunity to choose texts on a variety of topics that are meaningful to them, they should also have options for reading in multiple modalities. The texts available for students to choose from should reflect the text types that students engage in outside of the classroom (International Reading Association, 2012). Knowing how students read and write in their personal lives allows teachers to understand better the skills and resources they bring to class. Investigating and honoring the home culture of students, including their literary experiences, is an important key to increasing their motivation to read. For many students, this means incorporating more multimedia and interactive texts. Again, there is support within the Common Core standards for developing skills with multimedia and from the Common Core Publisher’s Criteria: “A variety of formats can also engage a wider range of students, such as high-quality newspaper and magazine articles as well as information-rich websites” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4).

However, remember that the text complexity model includes three major categories of criteria that must be weighed against each other when selecting reading material, and so choice of reading material is not always wide open. At times, teachers may provide choice among a variety of high-quality reading materials that reflects students’ diverse backgrounds and interests and that also meet the model’s expectations for quantitative and qualitative complexity. In some circumstances, reader or task considerations may outweigh the other criteria. For example, students who are learning English as a second language may have needs as readers that outweigh the criteria for a text to have a high level of readability (quantitative measure). The materials of choice for such students should remain challenging and evoke critical thinking while meeting readability levels appropriate for their level of English language proficiency.

Knowledge and experiences. Culturally and linguistically diverse students often have unique perspectives, worldviews, and frames of reference that impact their comprehension of and responses to particular texts. To implement instruction that is culturally responsive, it is critical that teachers seek to understand the prior knowledge and personal experiences of their students and to reflect on how those experiences differ from their own without passing judgment (Wisniewski, Fawcett, Padak, & Rasinski, 2012). When teachers understand individual differences, including differences between themselves and their students, it translates into instructional practices that support each student’s self-respect and feelings of security in the classroom (Nichols, 1996).

Through a deeper understanding of student cultures, teachers will be better able to incorporate authentic multicultural reading materials that reflect the backgrounds and experiences of diverse students. Further, selecting reading materials that honor what students already know and who they are as individuals and members of a cultural group has been shown to improve student achievement levels (Gay, 2000). Designing curriculum to enable

diverse readers to make connections between themselves and the text is an effective approach for supporting reading comprehension skills.

Diversity in our schools is growing, and, in response, our curriculums must also become diversified. The reader and task considerations within the Common Core text complexity model provide a foundation for such a change. Teachers need to select reading material and tasks based on the unique characteristics and needs of the children in their classrooms. Understanding student culture, backgrounds, and experiences, and then adapting curriculum to that understanding is part of the art of teaching, and allowing for student to make text selections themselves is one key way to increase motivation to read and engage in reading tasks. ●

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Q&A

Are achievement gaps really gaps in *academic language* levels?

By Heather Hein



Jane Hill

Despite the good intentions of educators and various educational programs for many years now, a nationwide gap in achievement persists between groups of students. McREL’s Jane Hill, a longtime educator in bilingual education and language acquisition and lead author of *Classroom Instruction That Works with English Language Learners* (first and second editions), talks to us about what she thinks is a primary but overlooked cause of this ongoing challenge: A gap in the *academic language* abilities between English-language learners and native speakers. To reduce this gap, teachers and school leaders need to ensure ELLs and other struggling students learn academic language and have opportunities to practice it, in both speaking and writing.



What do you mean by “academic language gap”?



JH: There is a difference between *conversational* language skills and *academic* language skills. If you moved to Italy and started studying Italian tomorrow, it would take you about two years to speak it proficiently in general conversation. If you wanted to study art at a university in Rome, it would take you a total of 5–7 years to have the level of *academic language* necessary to succeed in first-year classes. The same is true for English language learners (ELLs) in the U.S.—but they don’t have the possibility of studying the language for a few years before they try their hand at academics. From day one, they are on double duty, trying to meet academic content standards *and* English language proficiency standards simultaneously. Many of them can’t keep up—or just barely—and the result is an academic language gap that results in underachievement.



What is academic language?



JH: Academic language is, in a nutshell, the language of school. Students with academic language proficiency “sound like a book”; that is, they speak and write like authors, mathematicians, historians and scientists. No one does this naturally; everyone is what we call an “Academic Language Learner” (ALL). For example, in a middle school social studies class, the teacher may ask students to compare ancient civilizations. A student who is not proficient in academic language tends to answer in the least number of words possible, such as, “They both grew corn.” A more academic answer would include transitions and specific language—“Based on types of food production, the Ancient Romans and Mayans were similar because they both grew corn.”

Academic language has three dimensions: *disciplinary content and process vocabulary* (e.g., “photosynthesis” and “hypothesize”); *syntax* (the grammar associated with subject matter); and *discourse* (talking about content using complex sentences and high-level vocabulary). All students need to learn these three dimensions.



Why is academic language often overlooked in the classroom?



JH: Most regular classroom teachers are experts at teaching content, but they may not be aware of their ELL students’ need to attain academic, not just conversational, English language proficiency. So they may teach key vocabulary, but not the academic language that accompanies the content.

Why is *talking* about the content important?

So how do teachers teach academic language?

What does this mean for school leaders?

There are various reasons for this—a lack of training on appropriate strategies to align academic language to content, or a strong emphasis on reading and writing that takes away from time to have meaningful conversations about content. But any teacher who has ELLs in his or her classroom, no matter what the subject, is also a language teacher.

A **JH:** That is a very pertinent question. Research shows the importance for all students of having extended verbal exchanges about what they have read and what they are going to write. For ELLs, it's much more critical because, basically, if they can't say it, they can't write it. Native speakers can become better writers by practicing writing, but that's not true for non-native speakers who have a limited grasp of vocabulary, syntax, and grammatical forms and functions.

A **JH:** It may take a shift in mindset in terms of classroom environment, but it's important for teachers to understand that not only ELLs benefit from learning academic language. Think about your English-speaking students who come from backgrounds where non-specific language is predominant and who are not accustomed to engaging in conversation or giving and supporting opinions.

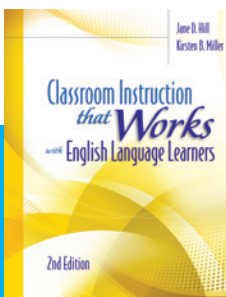
Teachers need to put specific structures in place that allow students multiple opportunities to talk with each other, hear good models of English, and learn the specific language that supports the content. There are many strategies available to do this. One of the most successful strategies we've used—and one that is supported by research—is reciprocal teaching, which engages students in four behaviors of good readers: predicting, summarizing, questioning, and clarifying.

Or, in the social studies example I mentioned earlier, the teacher could model the appropriate transition words, and then ask students to talk in pairs using words such as “based on,” “compared with,” and “similarly.” After oral practice, the teacher could then anticipate seeing similar transitions in her students' writing.

A **JH:** Incorporating more talk in the classroom may take a shift in mindset. If quiet classrooms are the norm in your school, some teachers may not be comfortable with more talk and noise.

School leaders need to create demand for such a change. One way is to use outcome data from academic achievement standards and English language proficiency standards, as well as observation data, to help teachers understand what's really going with the language development of ELLs in the school and how it impacts their achievement.

School leaders can support teachers in using structures and strategies to allow for more academic talk for ALLs. For example, they can provide targeted professional development, co-teach alongside content teachers to provide opportunities for extended academic talk related to literacy, model how to integrate academic talk into daily work, and provide substitutes so that teachers can observe others who are successfully integrating academic talk into subject-matter instruction.



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Taking a good look at ourselves: *Critical reflection mobilizes culturally responsive instruction*

By Robin Wisniewski

Are you prejudiced?

Like most people in education, you would probably answer “no” without hesitation when asked this question directly. You may even feel somewhat offended that you’re being asked. What if you were given a survey with questions about your thoughts and actions related to prejudice? Your answers would probably still indicate a clear “no.”

However, when prejudice is examined *implicitly*—as measured by automatic associations and tasks—negative biases are often revealed (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). As educators, these implicit prejudices, whether we realize it or not, affect what we do in the classroom. Specifically, they affect the expectations, spoken and unspoken, we have of our students, which research has shown to be a powerful predictor of students’ achievement and long-term success (Akey, 2006; De Boer, Bosker, & van der Werf, 2010; Hinnant, O’Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009).

For several years, achievement gaps have been widening, as students from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds not only achieve significantly below their White peers but also face the lowest expectations (Boser, Wilhem, & Hanna, 2014). But, as the student demographics evolve—with students in minority groups making up more than half of the 2014–2015 kindergarten class nationwide—teacher expectations must also evolve, not only for current students and their families but for future students and their long-term success in college and the workplace.

The goal of this transformation in expectations is not *equality* but *equity*. Whereas equality refers to having identical privileges, status, or rights “regardless of the individual’s needs, current situation, background, or context” (Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Terrell, & Lindsey, 2006, p. 90), equity refers to “providing disparate groups with what they need so that their *outcomes* [emphasis added] are the same” (p. 90). When outcomes are the same, true equity can exist.

The missing piece: critical reflection

When educators think of culturally responsive instruction, they typically think of instructional strategies that aim to make lessons relevant to students of various backgrounds and cultures. Ladson-Billings (1994) described it as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically” by using cultural resources to teach knowledge, skills, and attitudes (pp. 17–18).

While knowing about students’ lives outside of school is critical to understanding their academic strengths and weaknesses, modifying instructional strategies is not enough to change expectations. For example, one study of 3rd and 4th grade teachers in a large urban school district found that two years of training on how to incorporate students’ home language and culture into instruction failed to change teacher beliefs, and they continued to see the language and culture of their Mexican emigrant students as deficits (Lee, Luykx, Buxton, & Shaver, 2007).

So can teacher beliefs and expectations be changed? Yes, when professional development addresses them directly through the use of *critical reflection*.

Reflection has been part of teacher education and professional development since Dewey’s (1933) descriptions of “disciplined inquiry,” but it has focused primarily on self-reflection. Self-reflection refers to being conscious of ourselves; critical reflection, on the other hand, refers to our continued inquiry into our beliefs, prejudices, biases, and expectations in order to leverage the

strengths of everyone in a classroom. Critical reflection has often been secondary or even absent altogether from teacher education (Servage, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009), despite its strength in transforming our own learning as well as that of those we lead and teach (Wisniewski, 2005).

In culturally responsive instruction, the use of critical reflection challenges implicit assumptions and blocks the reinforcement of negative expectations (e.g., Nuri-Robins et al., 2006; Sleeter, 2005). It's essential that educators first acknowledge how deficit-based notions of diverse students "continue to permeate traditional school thinking, practices, and placement" (Howard, 2003, p. 198) and then examine their beliefs and practices within the broader historical and sociopolitical context (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Howard, 2003).

Activities for critical reflection

If your goal is to improve the achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students through culturally responsive instruction, start with one or more of the following three critical reflection activities. They can be done individually, with colleagues, or in a series of professional learning sessions. Delving into awareness leads to authentic, equitable practice.

Activity 1: Unearth unconscious biases

If you answered the question, "Are you prejudiced?" immediately with a resounding "no," this activity may be helpful. It is based on the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which was developed by researchers at the University of Washington in 1998 to measure the strength of a person's automatic association between mental representations of objects (concepts) in memory.

In a study of the influences of prejudice on expectations and student achievement, researchers gave 41 teachers both explicit and implicit tests of prejudice (van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). The explicit test, which included Likert-scale responses to prompts about students and culture, revealed positive self-presentations of low prejudice. But results from the implicit test showed substantial prejudices. Between 1998 and 2007, more than 3 million people took one or more of the 17 IAT subtests, creating an exhaustive database of demographic information on implicit and explicit prejudice.

The IAT is available free online, if you agree to let your results be used anonymously in the dataset. Go to <http://implicit.harvard.edu/>, sign up, and choose a subtest from the list. When you finish, answer these critical reflection questions:

1. In a study with 302 teachers taking two of the IAT subtests, one on race and one on skin tone, the results revealed five types of reactions: disregard, disbelief, acceptance, discomfort, and distress (Clark & Zygmont, 2014). After viewing your IAT results, characterize your reaction as one or more of the five types. How would you explain your reaction? What does your reaction mean in the broader educational context with your students?

2. Recall the explicit questions on bias at the end of the test where you also entered your demographic information. The implicit and explicit questions are related but typically yield disparate results. What similarities or differences might you expect? How might awareness of even minor prejudice or bias assist you in your teaching?

This activity helps raise awareness of prejudice and bias, which ultimately affects student expectations for historically marginalized groups. When prejudice decreases, expectations increase, and so do achievement and long-term student outcomes (Pigott & Cowen, 2000).

Activity 2: Examine elements of individual cultures

At the heart of culturally responsive instruction is a term not always understood: culture. Banks (2006) offers a definition based on the perspective of an individual on six elements: (1) values and behavioral styles, (2) language and dialects, (3) nonverbal communications, (4) cultural cognitiveness, (5) perspectives, worldviews, and frames of reference, and (6) identification. Noteworthy is that this definition is based on students' perspectives—"not what we see about students, nor what we assume they think. Rather, it is a point of view that guides what students do" (Wisniewski, Fawcett, Padak, & Rasinski, 2012, p. 5). Students' perspectives are what we need to respond to in our instruction.

It's also worth noting that the perspectives of diverse students are different from those of students of the dominant culture in a school. Children of the dominant group experience knowledge of their culture significantly more than those in non-dominant groups. This knowledge, referred to as "culture capital," is passed down generation after generation within families (Bourdieu, 1977) and has an advantageous effect on academic success (Jaeger, 2011).

When we see ourselves culturally and see students culturally from their perspectives, we no longer treat multiculturalism as something additive, like a unit on Native Americans or reading narratives from famous Black Americans during one month of the year. Rather, the goal of culturally responsive instruction is transformation, where student voices are empowered, they are free of perceptions of deficit, and we see the cultural capital of all students as assets to the curriculum (Nieto, 1996, 1999; Sleeter & Grant, 2009).

Because we cannot transform without our own critical cultural reflection, these questions focus on your culture and perceptions of your culture:

1. First, draw a circle to represent a pie chart and divide into 4–8 pieces that represent your culture. Consider what words come to mind when you think of the word "culture," like religion, clothing, ethnicity, race, gender, foods, or language. Write one aspect of your culture in each one of the pie pieces. Adjust the sizes of the pieces according to the ones that are most salient in your life. Then, select one of the pieces as the cultural perspective to use for question two.
2. Write down Banks' six elements of culture (listed above). Ask yourself the following questions relative to your selected piece of culture. What values do you hold in high regard? What language or varieties of your or other languages do you connect

with? What forms of nonverbal communication, including body language, eye contact, or gestures, do you use? What is unique or different about the way you and your peer interact relative to others in society? On what might you build your frame of reference within your culture? Finally, consider a new lens: How might someone else, maybe your colleague or a student in your class, complete this activity with a different cultural selection?

When we examine our culture, we come to understand that we are all part of some kind of culture, or many cultures. We can see where negative beliefs about cultures different from our own may have originated and where our cultures overlap. Most importantly, it leads to an understanding of how we need to incorporate our students' perspectives into our teaching in order to understand, magnify, and leverage diverse cultural capital.

Activity 3: Recognize difference-blindness

Have you heard others make comments like, "I don't see difference in my students," "I treat all of my students the same way," or "Diversity is celebrating what we have in common"? These statements exemplify colorblindness, or "any policy, practice, or behavior that ignores existing differences or that considers such differences inconsequential" (Nuri-Robins et al., 2006, p. 89).

Colorblindness in adults and teachers has resulted in discriminatory practices, leading to decreased cognitive performance in ethnic minorities (Holoien & Shelton, 2011), reinforced beliefs of personal deficiencies in Black students' academic failure (Tarca, 2005), social exclusion of non-dominant groups (Theodorou, 2011), and restricted English language learners' academic access and accurate assessment (Reeves, 2004).

Also called "difference-blindness," this neutrality toward difference does not remedy the negative effects of historical cultural dominance on diverse students, just as being blind to a disability "is to make it impossible to address the very thing that is giving rise to the individual's mistreatment and lesser opportunity in the first place" (Wise, 2010, p. 20). Difference-blindness is evident in teacher policies and practices and even in school leader and school board discourse, and it ignores systemic inequalities in the lives of students (Turner, 2015; Welton, Diem, & Holme, 2013).

Inequalities are related to a power imbalance. To do the work of culturally responsive instruction, we must recognize the cultural capital of the privileged, dominant group in school (Gay, 2010). Specifically, in the United States, power is associated with Whiteness, or the ongoing Eurocentric advantage formed over the history of our country (Delpit, 2012; Nieto, 2010; Nuri-Robins et al., 2006). Schools are institutions that reproduce the advantages and disadvantages, favoring cultural capital of the dominant group.

The following critical reflection questions address difference-blindness:

1. First, consider White privilege discourse. In 1989, Peggy McIntosh wrote the now-canonical monograph, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. She defined White privilege as a "package of unearned assets which [Whites] can count on cashing in every day...an invisible weightless knapsack of

special provisions." Her list of 26 privileges includes examples such as, "I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed," and "When I was told what is positive about our national heritage or in civilization, I was shown that people of my color made it what it is." Find her list of privileges online, and then ask yourself: How might these be relevant to your life? How does this list relate to a color consciousness (as opposed to difference-blindness) stance?

2. While MacIntosh's text has been widely used in teacher education and has also been edited for use in different contexts (e.g., for "male privilege" or "heterosexual privilege"), critics say it doesn't help understand the history of inequity and how to take collective action for social justice (e.g., Lensmire et al., 2013). In terms of difference-conscious action, reread Nuri-Robins et al.'s definitions of equality and equity (see the fourth paragraph of this article). How do you relate personally to equality and equity? How can you provide disparate groups with what they need in your teaching so that their outcomes are the same (in essence, closing the achievement gap)?

This activity demonstrates that race matters—and that racism isn't about just Black and White; its inequity affects anyone who is biracial, multiracial, White, Black, Hispanic, or of Native American heritage. When diverse students are discounted, students from privileged backgrounds are favored and power dynamics are reinforced (Delpit, 1998, 2012; Nieto, 2010). To move from difference-blindness to consciousness, educators must work toward the recognition of privilege and difference.

The power of beliefs and expectations

The critical reflection of teachers is essential for making significant gains toward closing achievement gaps. Research shows that we all have implicit prejudices and that our prejudices affect the expectations we have of students—which is one of the strongest predictors of achievement.

As researcher Lisa Delpit (2012) reminds us, "There is no achievement gap at birth." When we expect that students are competent, they will grow. When we believe their language and cultural knowledge are valuable, students will perform better. Through critical reflection of prejudices, cultures, power, privilege, and differences, teachers can move mobilize culturally responsive instruction, using student cultures and modalities to select and apply strategies and resources that ensure high-quality instruction for all. ●

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Cultural connections lay groundwork for systemic change in Cree Nation schools

by Christine H. Schmidt

The Cree School Board (CSB) serves 11 schools in nine remote communities spread across 4,500 square miles of northern Quebec, Canada. When the CSB launched a school and system improvement initiative with McREL in 2010, the primary challenge was evident when viewed from 30,000 feet: There was much ground to cover. Just getting to each school would take a great amount of effort, and a blanket approach to system-wide improvement would not be effective. However, what they lacked in physical closeness they made up for in the culture they share—and a belief that all Cree children deserve a high-quality education.

Deepening cultural connections

With the goal of developing a comprehensive school improvement plan to build the foundation for a continuous system-wide improvement cycle, CSB and McREL first had to address a unique situation: Cree Nation students, teachers, parents, and community members speak up to three different languages—Cree, French, and English. Kindergarten classes are taught in Cree and focus on understanding of Cree culture and values. In 1st grade classrooms, English or French is introduced as a second language. Cree culture and language classes are an ongoing and integral part of the K–12 curriculum, offered at least one hour every day.

Supporting second-language learning is a major component of all of the work with the CSB. In the first two years, McREL and CSB curriculum teams focused on developing a guaranteed and

viable curriculum (GVC) for the elementary level in language arts that is written in all three languages and established an academic vocabulary sensitive to the needs of second-language learners. The GVC also reflects the cultural values of the Cree Nation and aligns with the Québec Education Program, a set of core competencies set forth by the province.

Implementation of the GVC was achieved through guided lesson planning, demonstration lessons, professional development, and individual coaching and training on McREL's Classroom Instruction That Works strategies. Some of Cree's teachers are themselves language learners, so McREL customized the training to include more processing time, hands-on learning, and nonlinguistic representation. For example, facilitators had teachers work in groups to both develop their oral academic language and model how to use group work with students.

The training showed teachers the importance of setting learning objectives, which allowed students to understand not only what they're learning but why, helping them connect with the curriculum in more meaningful, relevant ways. Teachers also learned about how to develop a cooperative learning environment in which students can build on their language-acquisition skills through peer conversation and collaboration.

Cooperative learning is particularly important for second-language learners, said Kent Davis, a McREL consultant who has worked with the Cree schools for four years. Accessing background knowledge and talking with each other about what they know is crucial for language acquisition. In the classroom, it takes this form: "Talk to your neighbor first, then talk in small groups, then share the information with the rest of the class," Davis said. Teachers are now using student work produced during cooperative learning tasks to assess whether they are on the right track with students.

In addition to the tri-lingual GVC, creating a culturally relevant curriculum that integrates Cree culture and values into lessons has proved invaluable for students. Many Cree traditions are based on hunting, fishing, and trapping, the mainstay of the Cree Nation. Every spring, for example, Cree communities break from regular activities to participate in "Goose Break," a two-week period during which community members, including students on a scheduled break from school, venture out into the bush to hunt wild geese. This tradition, which dates back centuries for the Cree Nation, brings the entire community together to hunt and feast.

When students return from Goose Break—energized, excited, and full of stories—teachers now offer highly engaging lesson plans that include, for example, literacy components in which students share, reflect on, and write about their experiences, further demonstrating their knowledge and experience of Cree culture. "Every school has talked about how they can continue to integrate Cree culture into the rest of the content areas in a way that is engaging for kids, because they *know* that it is highly engaging," McREL consultant Kristin Rouleau said. "If they're going to be teaching life science, there's an obvious natural connection to hunting and the animals that are part of the culture. They can use that for a jumping off point." Students who exemplify Cree values in their everyday life are recognized in monthly school awards assemblies.

Taking collective action

Finding ways to connect and build on improvement efforts across all of the 11 Cree schools has been challenging, considering the wide expanses of land that separate the communities from each other. Over three years, McREL regularly brought school leadership teams together for large-group professional development sessions, providing technical assistance and following up with visits to individual schools to support the implementation of improvement initiatives. The work was designed to build the capacity of the CSB, school principals, school leadership teams, and teachers for sustained improvements in five key areas:

1. using data to guide school improvement and assess progress,
2. using research-based practices to improve teaching and increase student achievement,
3. fostering and engaging in shared leadership,
4. creating and maintaining a purposeful community, and

5. establishing a comprehensive and systematic continuous improvement process.

After initial improvements in attendance policies and support systems, the focus shifted to improving classroom practices and supporting teachers with professional development.

In support of the collective efforts toward long-lasting systemic change, principals from all Cree schools now convene for a weeklong meeting every two months, and are having more conversations with each other about their processes, successes, and challenges. For example, in a recent meeting, one school principal described that school's use of focus groups that concentrate on improvement goals in specific academic areas. The CSB is working on ways to sustain school improvement efforts for existing and future school leaders, and taking ownership of the elementary tri-lingual curriculum and developing it for the high school level.

Sustaining improvement efforts

As the schools have learned the value of working together, and developed deeper connections with their local communities, attendance and punctuality across schools have increased, as has the average graduation rate. In one school, Cree students performed significantly better on 2012–2013 Canadian Achievement Tests than they ever had, exceeding Canadian norms.

All of the school leadership teams have reported that they now 1) understand the stages of continuous improvement and apply them to their change initiatives; 2) use agreements to determine specific actions to reach their goals; 3) involve all staff members in implementing, monitoring, and sustaining school initiatives; and 4) have regular meetings, with roles, structures, and processes in place.

Reflecting on the progress made so far, Eric Grimstead, a secondary counselor in James Bay Eeyou School in Chisasibi, said: "Our school has adopted a new organizational standard. We have started to work in a collaborative manner, using a common professional language that we didn't have before. [McREL] consultants bring a world education view and adapt it to the reality of teaching in the North."

Involving the Cree Nation in the school improvement process has allowed the CSB to tap into and build on their cultural values and make informed decisions about what is best for their students. As the CSB shifts its focus from individual schools to systemic improvement, Davis said, "You can't realize change from a district level or a principal's office. You have to involve teachers in the classrooms, school leadership—not just the principal's office—and the organization as a whole."

The view from 30,000 feet now reveals a carefully woven tapestry of system-wide, incremental improvement across Cree Nation schools. The deliberate weaving together of culture, language, community, and a focus on school improvement has better engaged students with their learning and teachers with their teaching, creating a sense of collective efficacy and paving the way for sustained systemic change. ●

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Seeing classrooms through the eyes of our students

By Bryan Goodwin

Years ago, while teaching American literature, one of my favorite units was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Arguably, the essence of the book lies in the quote from Atticus Finch, who observes, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." In many ways, that's been the theme of this issue of *Changing Schools*—understanding learning environments through the eyes of our students.

Doing so can sometimes be difficult, especially if we don't share our students' culture or know what it's like to be a member of their subgroup. Consider, for example, a subtle, yet powerful psychological influence on student achievement known as *stereotype threat*—the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about the race, gender, or social group to which we belong.

Understanding stereotype threat

In a now-famous study, researchers at Princeton University (Alter, Aronson, Darley, Rodriguez, & Ruble, 2010) found that minority children who were asked to report their ethnicity prior to a test answered, on average, 38% of questions correctly, whereas those who were asked to report their ethnicity *after* the test got 59% correct. Beyond the artificial confines of laboratory experiences, stereotype threat can have real-world consequences, often leading to a downward spiral of lower performance, which further reinforces poor academic self-image, and begets ever-lower performance (Cohen & Garcia, 2008).

Even when no one does anything to trigger stereotype threat, it can still have negative effects. To wit: A meta-analysis of 43 studies of different conditions—some that sought to trigger stereotype threat,

some that sought to diminish it, and some that did neither—Walton and Cohen (2011) discovered that even when nothing was done to trigger it, *latent* stereotype threat still depressed student performance by the equivalent of 60 fewer points on the SAT.

That's the bad news.

Overcoming stereotype threat

The good news is that rather simple interventions can reverse these negative effects. In one experiment, researchers asked Black and White college freshmen to read and reflect upon the results of a survey of upperclassmen that ostensibly reported that all college students, regardless of race or background, experienced initial feelings of academic self-doubt which they later overcame. The students then recorded a video message for future students to reassure them that doubts about belonging in college were normal. The intervention (which took less than an hour overall) boosted the GPAs of Black students by nearly a quarter of a point the next semester—an effect that persisted into their senior year, eventually cutting the achievement gap by 79% and tripling the number of Black students in the top quarter of their class (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Another study asked 7th graders to spend 15 minutes writing



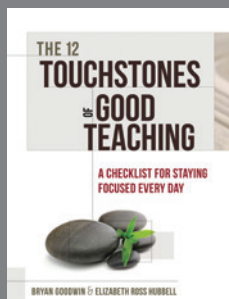
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about the role of personal values (such as religion or family relationships) in their personal lives. This simple exercise cut in half the number of Black students earning a D or less, reduced achievement gaps by 40%, and reversed previous declines in performance—presumably because reflecting on their own positive personal attributes buttressed students' feelings of self-worth and disrupted the downward spiral of stereotype threat (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006).

The real magic

Certainly, such interventions aren't "magic;" good instruction and challenging curriculum must also be in place (Yeager & Walton, 2011, p. 274). Moreover, they must be applied subtly; if students perceive someone is trying to "fix" them, they may feel further stigmatized, which can reinforce, rather than reduce, stereotype threat.

For educators, the real magic from this research might well be in helping us to do what Scout, the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, does at the end of the novel when she stands on the porch of her misunderstood neighbor, Boo Radley, and sees, for the first time, her home from his eyes. "You never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them" (p. 279), she observes.

The same might be said of diverse classrooms; we may never really know our students until, figuratively speaking, we can sit in their desks and peer back out at us from their eyes.

Bryan Goodwin is president and CEO of McREL International. He presents research and insights to education audiences worldwide and is the author of *Simply Better* and co-author of *The 12 Touchstones of Good Teaching*. Contact him at bgoodwin@mcrel.org or 303.632.5602.

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