

Stringing the Vertical Threads

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Basic Beliefs Underlying Culturally Responsive Teaching

Before beginning her work, the weaver must first secure vertical threads onto the loom. This is the “warp” through which the “woof” of pattern and color will be woven horizontally. Similarly, as we approach our loom of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), it is important and helpful to address some basic beliefs about ourselves and our students, and about the deeper purpose of education. These are the foundational premises throughout this book that provide a strong warp for the cloth we will weave, the distinctive texture of thought and belief underlying the very best of Culturally Responsive Teaching.

These basic precepts belong to the realm of one’s deepest convictions about life and learning. The warp of our individual beliefs is the foundation of our attitudes and actions in the classroom. Therefore, it is essential to examine our perspectives and perceptions to see where change might be necessary or new understanding acquired.

Some of the tenets presented here have been adapted from the materials created by the REACH Center for Multicultural Education (www.reachctr.org/), developed there by my husband, Gary, and other REACH trainers. Other precepts have grown out of many years of my own research and engagement in the fundamentals of successful teaching. These precepts comprise a philosophical foundation that will support you in becoming an effective culturally responsive teacher.

If any of these foundational ideas are not yet your own, I ask that you allow yourself to “try them on” to see if they might make your teaching

practice richer and more rewarding and your students' experiences more enlivened and productive. Following are the 10 Vertical Threads onto which we will later weave the Seven Principles for CRT.

1. Relationship Is the Foundation of Good Teaching and Learning

All learning is based on our relationships. Relationship is the essence of education, and from the influences of our first relationships, we pattern our approach to life. In his workshops with teachers, Gary Howard says, "Relationship *matters*." And he defines cultural competence as "the will and the ability to form authentic and effective relationships across differences" (Howard, 2015). We know from stereotype-threat research that intellectual performance is dependent on students' feelings of belonging and their trust in the people around them (Aaronson & Steel, 2005). Good teacher-student relationships are at the heart of students' attitudes toward learning and their abilities to receive, process, and retain information. Our relationships with our students in the classroom today not only affect their achievement in the moment and in the year they are in our care but continue to influence them in their feelings toward school and education for years to come.

As we all know, not all children come to school emotionally prepared for the rigors of learning. Not all children are given the experience of being truly seen, known, respected, and cared about. Not all children are given the unconditional regard that is at the heart of healthy human development. Because of this, there is a compensatory role good teachers must play in the lives of many children—children across all racial, cultural, and economic lines—who need relationships with loving adults in their lives. Yet regardless of what they are getting or not getting at home, *all* children learn best through strong relationships with their teachers.

The first task of a good teacher is to consciously and deliberately establish this essential ground of quality relationship with every child. The tone of trust and mutual respect upon which the reciprocal door of teaching and learning swings is perhaps our most important pedagogical tool as culturally responsive teachers.

2. The Teacher Is a Lifelong Learner

It is liberating for us as teachers to consciously acknowledge that life is a constant process of learning. It takes us off the hook of needing to be "right" all the time—an assumption I find teachers often adopt as a function of our profession. The pressure to be the one "in-the-know" about all

things comes from the philosophical model that views children as empty vessels needing to be filled up with the knowledge of the world, doled out by our adult expertise.

If we can accept a more realistic role as guides and mentors for young people who are already quite full of innate intelligence and giftedness, then our job becomes more enjoyable and more authentic. Although we teachers are intelligent and educated adults who *do* know a great deal, we are, at the same time, ignorant of many things. By admitting this from time to time to our students, we establish a ground of honesty and humility that they will deeply respect. Rather than trying to be the *source* of all-important information (which no one individual could ever embody), we free ourselves to explore many answers together with our students. We become the guides for how and where to find the information they seek and enthusiastic role models for the lifelong love of learning that we want to engender in them.

We model this by being open with our students about things we may be learning outside the classroom as well as inside. When we talk to our students about our hobbies, our classes, our travels, or other experiences we are passionate about, we are enthusiastic role models for a lifelong love of learning. When we share with them something we learned from a friend, or from one of the students in our classroom, we demonstrate there is something to be learned in every moment and every situation.

Occasionally we can let our students see us deliberating about a negative encounter we might have had and what we should do about it. We can elicit their suggestions. It is important to be selective about what we share with our students. But by appropriately modeling our own problem-solving process in everyday situations, we can help our students realize that every struggle in their lives has potential personal growth hidden within it.

Contrary to what might be feared as loss of respect or classroom control if we share any uncertainty with our students, the opposite is usually the case. We can still be trusted authorities in their lives without needing to “know it all.” We can remain firm and maintain high expectations while at the same time reveal our vulnerability. Children respect honesty more than “perfection,” and they will eagerly join with us in a mutual pursuit of knowledge. Allowing ourselves to be honest about what we do not know teaches children that ignorance about something is not a failure, but a stimulus for finding answers, acquiring more information, and gaining greater awareness. The ability to genuinely say, “I don’t know, but let’s find out,” will take us far. We find that our students’ respect for us grows in direct proportion to our honesty with them.

This becomes most noticeably beneficial when we open ourselves to learning about our students' cultural backgrounds. Our active interest and readiness to learn about the many different cultural patterns, practices, and perspectives of our students and their families offers them valuable opportunities to teach us something, to share who they really are, and to feel appreciated for their cultural knowledge and expertise.

3. Context Is as Important as Content

The mastery of Culturally Responsive Teaching requires a keen awareness of the contextual ambiance of the classroom and an appreciation of its importance to the learning experience. Many children have “field-sensitive” ways of perceiving and learning. That is, they are holistically oriented and constantly attuned to every nuance in the atmosphere of their environment. The emotional tone of the teacher, displayed by our attitudes, preferences, values, and “voice,” is immediately picked up by the sensitive antennae of children. Attending to the contextual background of the educational process is sometimes referred to as being aware of the “hidden curriculum” (Glossary of Education Reform, 2015) that directly affects each student's degree of concentration and ability to absorb intellectual content.

As culturally responsive teachers, we consciously and consistently recognize this field-sensitivity in our teaching design and classroom organization. We pay close attention to the messages we send to children through body language, tone of voice, and choice of words and behavior. This requires continual self-observance and self-reflection.

The social-emotional context of learning imparts its own lessons and enhances the successful mental/conceptual learning of the “explicit” curriculum made up of the objectives and content at each grade level. Many of the suggestions provided in these *Bright Ribbons* chapters relate more to context than to content and are intended to support the establishment of a rich and inviting backdrop that will enhance and enliven the overall drama of learning in your classroom.

4. Everything Can Be Seen From Multiple Perspectives

In left-brain dominant educational models, people are trained to believe that there is only one right answer for any question. Things are perceived from a dualistic perspective of right or wrong, good or bad. When this is the case, all other answers or points of view are deemed incorrect or mistaken (sometimes even considered evil or dangerous), and people will go to great lengths to defend their sense of rightness, sometimes against all reason. This bias toward bifurcation reaches deeply into

the subconscious, dampening creativity, reducing the exploration of alternative possibilities, and rendering us defensive and inflexible for fear of being *wrong*. Such an impulse also creates the predisposition to judge others for their differences, claiming “If I am right, then he must be wrong.”

More right-brain and holistic cultures and educational environments, on the other hand, teach children that there are always multiple possibilities in an unlimited universe and numerous answers to any challenge. Through our exposure to other cultural ways of thinking, perceiving, and behaving, we all have much to learn. This simple yet basic premise of multiple perspectives breeds tolerance, acceptance, and openness. When we as teachers reinforce the idea that there are many ways to solve a problem or look at a situation, we are helping to infuse the left-brain intellect with right-brain openness and creativity, seeding the capacity for healthy cultural responsiveness and wisdom in our students.

This higher order thinking skill—the ability to see more than one point of view—lies at the heart of Culturally Responsive Teaching. It is an urgently needed prerequisite for global citizenship. It is the ability to entertain multiple perspectives on any question or topic that allows the perceiver to hold two competing opinions in mind at one time, thus opening the possibility for considering the worth of each point of view. This does not require that we always agree with another opinion, but only that we learn to give time for thoughtful consideration of alternative ideas. This stance engenders respect not only for someone else’s perspective on a specific subject but for the experiences and the world view from which that other perspective was born. As Einstein so aptly modeled in his presentation of the Theory of Relativity, reality is constructed differently when viewed through various lenses. The culturally responsive teacher allows for different windows on “truth.”

The capacity for multiple perspectives allows us and our students to embrace ambiguity and to actually enjoy viewing diverse aspects of any picture. It is an inclusive way of being, a “both/and” way of looking at life. The need to be overly definitive or exclusively right gives way to modest and friendly dialogue with those who see the world through a different lens, recognizing that no one viewpoint can possibly grasp the entire tapestry of existence. Embracing multiple perspectives is an acknowledgement that we are each enhanced through conversation and connection across our differences. This flexible outlook does not limit our capacity to form opinions and have our own beliefs, but it allows us to hold those opinions lightly enough to keep our beliefs open to maturation and ever-evolving understanding. It also allows us to laugh at ourselves, to take a second look at our beliefs when we become too serious, too self-righteous, or more married to opinion and belief than to love.

By expanding our capacity to consider multiple perspectives, we model for our students a humble, generous, and inclusive way of being. Watching us, they discover there are many levels of truth, countless ways to perceive reality, numerous ideas to consider, and scores of ways to express even one idea. The world is a bigger place when we can think this way. By becoming more inclusive and magnanimous in their thinking and feeling, our students gain respect for both themselves and others. An open heart and an open mind are essential elements of CRT. Throughout this book, we will utilize the concept of multiple perspectives as an open-minded, open-hearted way of approaching learning and life.

5. The Classroom Is a Community

With so much divisiveness and alienation in the world today, the basic skills related to community-building are a critical and healing part of Culturally Responsive Teaching. The dominant paradigms of individuality and superiority over others that foster exclusivity, competition, and survival-of-the-fittest do not engender the creation of sustainable and healthy communities. The plethora of cliques in our schools and gangs on our streets indicates that our young people are hungry for community. But such quasi-communities do not really alleviate the loneliness and self-absorption of their members, based as they are on groupthink and expectations of sameness within the circle, combined with judgment of, or hatred for, those outside the circle. Cliques and gangs are the youthful mirrors of the prevailing pain that characterizes much of the larger adult society.

Genuine community, on the other hand, fosters both self-respect and authentic respect for others. Since children's natural predisposition for connection is easily thwarted in individualistic, competitive environments, community-building must be intentionally included as part of the classroom ethos. When an authentic and cooperative learning community is established, a sense of safety for one's own personhood is secured. Shared ideas with others are engendered. Reciprocity is enhanced. Communication skills are emphasized and constantly reinforced. Children are taught the skills for conflict resolution. Speaking one's truth and maintaining one's boundaries are clear expectations as is respecting those rights in others. Individual uniqueness is valued. Each student's viewpoint is welcomed and encouraged. Harmony, cooperation, and respect are intentionally reinforced. Commonalities, as well as differences, are acknowledged and appreciated. In healthy community, the students experience the power of their interdependent giftedness as learners. Since many of our students may be coming to us from cultures where

community and cooperation are deeply valued, they have much to teach us about building a positive learning community. When community is established in our classrooms, there is more room for the creative synergy that fashions a dynamic learning context for all.

6. We Are All Alike and We Are All Different

Culturally responsive teachers offer a balanced perspective that appreciates our unique personal and cultural differences, while at the same time values our fundamental unity as members of the human family. This balanced perspective positively permeates the learning atmosphere of the classroom. If we focus only on differences or only on sameness, we do not sufficiently serve our students. Both are mutual, interdependent aspects of a healthy outlook toward oneself and others. To exclusively emphasize the sameness vector, *how we are alike*, focusing only on the unity aspect of our human nature, is to be “color blind” to a student’s distinctive identity. There are teachers who, in trying to be equitable with their students, sometimes claim, “I don’t see color.” However, if one asks people of color how that statement makes them feel, they will usually say that they do not feel seen for who they are. “Color blindness” deprives us of the beauty, depth, and stimulation of diversity. On the other hand, to solely focus on *how we are different* (even when differences are valued) can cause us to miss out on the warmth of connection that comes from our kinship and community as human beings.

A “both/and” approach to similarities and differences is a central quality of Culturally Responsive Teaching. “How are these alike?” and “How are they different?” are compare-and-contrast questions that help students develop social skills as well as the capacity for higher level thinking that leads to gains in academic achievement (Marzano, 2007). The frequent use of compare-and-contrast questions will be demonstrated in several subject areas throughout this book. Providing a dynamic balance of sameness and difference is a foundational premise that makes education more substantial and life more interesting.

7. We Are All American Plus

One of the most important metaphors for a CRT teacher to adopt is the image of our country as a “salad bowl,” with an array of amazingly diverse fruits and vegetables tossed into it. The outmoded “melting pot” theory suggests that people must get hurled into a hot pot and then melted down into some homogenous mixture that is accepted as “American.” In contrast, the salad bowl symbolism allows us to keep our personal,

ethnic, and cultural identities intact and still be flavored with a dressing that unifies us in our American-ness. As such, everyone and every culture are welcomed and considered valuable to the social fabric. Unless we are Native American, every member of this society has roots in another land, and each culture that has arrived here has brought its contributions and its struggles to the emerging civilization.

In my lifetime career with children and teachers in the field of Multi-cultural Education, I have observed that many white teachers, especially those who have grown up in predominantly white communities, have a tendency to see others, especially people of color, as the ones having culture and racial identity and fail to see the cultural milieu in which they themselves swim. Yet our students are very aware of our cultural distinctiveness. The term “white” is a generalized descriptive adjective that includes a gestalt of numerous attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are noticed by many non-white students. Greater awareness of how we are each influenced and formed by our cultural environments and the ability to appreciate, as well as critique, our own unique cultural heritage are big self-reflective steps for teachers toward greater CRT expertise. *All* Americans have distinguishing cultural identities beneath that of being American.

Adopting the salad bowl viewpoint also significantly alters a common and usually unconscious paradigm that seeks sameness in others in order to feel they are “one of us.” White people often have a subconscious tendency to perceive people of color, or those who come from cultures other than their own, as someone other than American, someone “forever foreign.” It is a common complaint from young people of color who have been born in this country and have a mastery of the English language to still be frequently asked, “Where are you from?” And even Native American students, who are here on their original homeland, are sometimes considered to be outsiders by those who now occupy their land. Additionally, those students whose families have not yet obtained citizenship are still here now, participating in the richly diverse American mix that makes up our nation. So it is important for us to understand these in-group/out-group dynamics and counter cultural bias in ourselves in order to be more inclusive of all our students.

It is also critical to recognize that most young people want very much to be perceived and accepted as American by their peers and their teachers. So, while we are opening the doors for every child from any culture to feel welcome and at home in our classroom, it is important not to single out a child as a representative of, or spokesperson for, his culture—the “Exhibit A” phenomenon. It is optimum to allow our students to volunteer information about their linguistic and cultural heritage and all other

groups with which they identify, in their own time, and by their own initiation, once they have determined that the environment in our classroom is culture-safe.

Furthermore, for those of us who teach in a situation where all our students are of one particular ethnic background, there are still many nuances of differences to honor among the individuals in our class. It is important to introduce our students to the extensive varieties of American groups in preparation for their exposure to more diversity later in their lives, even though those differences may not be present in our school. In this way, we are responsibly preparing them for informed participation in pluralistic American democracy and world citizenship.

8. Every Child Is Gifted

As demonstrated by Howard Gardner's analysis of eight kinds of intelligences (2011), giftedness is many-faceted. Stretching the screen even farther, we realize that giftedness is not limited to just eight facets but manifests in an infinite variety of forms. One child has a sense of humor that lights up the day. Another has the gift of compassion. Still others are dancers, artists, great debaters, or clever problem-solvers. Some are philosophers. Some are organizers or natural leaders. Some students are bursting with infectious enthusiasm. Others are able to be pensive, thoughtful, and deep. While it is true that children have varying levels of ability in the skills we teach, all children are gifted at something, and these gifts, if recognized and educed in the classroom environment, can greatly enhance the learning experience. Expanding our understanding of intelligence beyond the boundaries of standardized testing, we can see that all kids are smart in different ways. Out of respectful awareness of the precious giftedness of each student, relationships are enhanced and teaching becomes more supportive of success for every child.

Each one of us comes into this world with much to learn and also with much to give. When we feel our gifts are recognized and received by others, we become happier and more generous (Dixon, 2011). When we, as teachers, value and capitalize upon each student's inherent talents and gifts, we reinforce, again and again, her understanding that differences are respected in our presence, that everyone can contribute to the common good, and that each child is safe and appreciated for being exactly who she is in our classroom.

Broadening this notion of giftedness to include the many aspects of culture that children bring, our classroom becomes rich with giftedness and everyone benefits from not only realizing their own contributions to the collective but valuing those of others. Our students have the

opportunity to see the world through a lens that is broader and more inclusive than the dominant linear and single-dimensional lens of the modern world that focuses too much on making judgments and creating hierarchies of worth.

By appreciating our students' individual and cultural gifts, we contribute to the transformational movement of Culturally Responsive Teaching that goes beyond the "one-size-fits-all," linear, singularly left-brain definition of what is good and valuable in society. Acknowledging the giftedness of each child, we and our students can enjoy the rich diversity within our classroom and capitalize on the multiple intelligences that everyone brings to the process.

9. Any Student Can Learn Anything

Given the right environment and the right approach, any child can learn almost anything. This belief may be difficult to adopt at first, for our experience tells us that people come into life with many levels of ability and intelligence—and they certainly do. Furthermore, our programming tells us, "You can't squeeze blood out of a turnip." But the questions are these: Who is the judge of these things? Who really knows who the turnips are? Do we have the right to make that pronouncement for any of our students? Many of the world's geniuses did very poorly in school.

Much of what children are capable of doing comes directly from the mirrors of themselves that the adults in their lives hold up. So does it not seem reasonable that we should be erring in the direction of having too great a belief in our students' abilities rather than creating a ceiling of limitation for them by our own potentially erroneous judgments? Starting with the conviction that any student can learn anything, we find that they do learn more often than they don't. Through our belief in their capacity to learn, we create a powerful magnetic field that draws them toward success. It is also essential, of course, to guard against being disappointed in our students when and if they do not measure up to our expectations. Disappointment can induce guilt and shame, so we must maintain our positive belief in their potential, offering encouragement all the way. Our job is to continually seek the keys that will unlock their intelligence. If the environment is conducive to learning, if we are loving to our students and respectful of their diverse backgrounds, if the material is presented in engaging and gradient stages, and if it is offered through a variety of modalities, then most often the learning will happen! And we see the fruits of our belief that given the right environment and the right approach, any child can learn almost anything (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015;

Chenowith, 2007). In the chapters that follow, we will see that effective CRT is undergirded by a strong belief in the intelligence and capability of our students.

10. Comprehensive Learning Addresses the Head, the Hands, and the Heart

Children are whole people with widely varying propensities and preferences for learning. The outcomes of our teaching are more remarkable, meaningful, and lasting when we approach our students through a range of portals that include thinking, feeling, and doing. Although many educators acknowledge the importance of these multiple doorways to learning, the current top-down mandates for scripted lessons and standardized outcomes have too often narrowed the way we teach. Teachers may often feel overwhelmed trying to comply with the many requirements and expectations of the job, too busy to study or apply what research tells us—that comprehensive learning requires a multisensory, emotionally rich, and academically inviting environment (Jensen, 2005).

However, teaching in a holistic and culturally responsive manner does not force us to pore too long over lesson plans or create more stress for ourselves. By focusing on the value of addressing the head, the heart, and the hands (or thinking, feeling, and doing) in the learning process, we can, in simple ways, make teaching much more pleasurable for ourselves and more effective for our students. Teaching any history lesson, for instance, can include a quick physical game and a reflective discussion about the emotional challenges of historical persons, as well as reading and summarizing content information. Approaching all skill development in this threefold way, we make the memory of the lesson more precise, more detailed, and more easily retrieved. Keeping the head, the hands, and the heart constantly in mind, we augment our lesson plans with varied and pleasurable challenges, without a lot of additional work on our part. In the chapters that follow, you will find many suggestions to support you in addressing the learning process in this multifaceted way.

With these Vertical Threads as the foundation of your professional approach, you are now ready to begin incorporating the Seven Principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching into your classroom practice. It is my sincere hope that these fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning will inspire your creative nature as a teacher and offer you a supportive warp onto which you can weave the bright ribbons of your own educational proficiency.