

1 Climbing Out of the Gap

Supporting Dependent Learners to Become Independent Thinkers



Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

The chronic achievement gap in most American schools has created an epidemic of dependent learners unprepared to do the higher order thinking, creative problem solving, and analytical reading and writing called for in the new Common Core State Standards. One of the goals of education is not simply to fill students with facts and information but to help them learn how to learn. Classroom studies document the fact that underserved English learners, poor students, and students of color routinely receive less instruction in higher order skills development than other students (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Oakes, 2005). Their curriculum is less challenging and more repetitive. Their instruction is more focused on skills low on Bloom's taxonomy. This type of instruction denies students the opportunity to engage in what neuroscientists call **productive struggle** that actually grows our

brainpower (Means & Knapp, 1991; Ritchhart, 2002). As a result, a disproportionate number of culturally and linguistically diverse students are dependent learners.

Here is the problem. On his own, a dependent learner is not able to do complex, school-oriented learning tasks such as synthesizing and analyzing informational text without continuous support. Let's not misunderstand the point—dependent doesn't mean deficit. As children enter school, we expect that they are dependent learners. One of our key jobs in the early school years is to help students become independent learners. We expect students to be well on their way to becoming independent learners by third grade, but we still find a good number of students who struggle with rigorous content well into high school, mostly students of color.

The closest we usually come to talking about this situation is the popular “Read by Third Grade” campaigns. We say children are *learning to read* up until third grade then shift to *reading to learn*. The same is true with cognition. In the early grades, we teach children habits of mind and help them build cognitive processes and structures so that as they move through school they are able to do complex thinking and independent learning.

For culturally and linguistically diverse students, their opportunities to develop habits of mind and cognitive capacities are limited or non-existent because of educational inequity. The result is their cognitive growth is stunted, leaving them dependent learners, unable to work to their full potential. In the *New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander (2012) suggests that this dependency is the first leg of the “school-to-prison pipeline” for many students of color. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the school-to-prison pipeline is a set of seemingly unconnected school policies and teacher instructional decisions that over time result in students of color not receiving adequate literacy and content instruction while being disproportionately disciplined for non-specific, subjective offenses such as “defiance.” Students of color, especially African American and Latino boys, end up spending valuable instructional time in the office rather than in the classroom. Consequently, they fall further and further behind in reading achievement just as reading is becoming the primary tool they will need for taking in new content. Student frustration and shame at being labeled “a slow reader” and having low comprehension lead to more off-task behavior, which the teacher responds to by sending the student out of the classroom. Over time, many students of color are pushed out of school because they cannot keep up academically because of poor reading skills and a lack of social-emotional support to deal with their increasing frustration.

but do we really?

Figure 1.1 Dependent Learner Characteristics vs. Independent Learner

Many culturally and linguistically diverse students are “dependent learners” who don’t get adequate support to facilitate their cognitive growth. Consequently, they are not able to activate their own neuroplasticity.

Do teachers know how to move them to indep.?

The Dependent Learner	The Independent Learner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is dependent on the teacher to carry most of the cognitive load of a task always • Is unsure of how to tackle a new task • Cannot complete a task without scaffolds • Will sit passively and wait if stuck until teacher intervenes • Doesn’t retain information well or “doesn’t get it” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relies on the teacher to carry some of the cognitive load temporarily • Utilizes strategies and processes for tackling a new task • Regularly attempts new tasks without scaffolds • Has cognitive strategies for getting unstuck • Has learned how to retrieve information from long-term memory

In recent years, there’s been a lot of talk about the reasons behind the low performance of many students of color, English learners, and poor students. Rather than examine school policies and teacher practices, some attribute it to a “culture of poverty” or different community values toward education. The reality is that they struggle not because of their race, language, or poverty. They struggle because we don’t offer them sufficient opportunities in the classroom to develop the cognitive skills and habits of mind that would prepare them to take on more advanced academic tasks (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Jackson, 2011). That’s the achievement gap in action. The reasons they are not offered more opportunities for rigor are rooted in the education system’s legacy of “separate and unequal” (Kozol, 2006; Oakes, 2005).

School practices that emphasize lecture and rote memorization are part of what Martin Haberman (1991) calls a “pedagogy of poverty” that sets students up to leave high school with outdated skills and shallow knowledge. They are able to regurgitate facts and concepts but have difficulty applying this knowledge in new and practical ways. To be able to direct their own lives and define success for themselves, they must be able to think critically and creatively.

As educators, we have to recognize that we help maintain the achievement gap when we don’t teach advanced cognitive skills to students we label as “disadvantaged” because of their language, gender, race, or socio-economic status. Many children start school with small learning gaps, but as they progress through school, the gap between African American and

Latino and White students grows because we don't teach them how to be independent learners. Based on these labels, we usually do the following (Means & Knapp, 1991):

- Underestimate what disadvantaged students are intellectually capable of doing
- As a result, we postpone more challenging and interesting work until we believe they have mastered "the basics"
- By focusing only on low-level basics, we deprive students of a meaningful or motivating context for learning and practicing higher order thinking processes

Just increasing standards and instructional rigor won't reverse this epidemic. Dependent learners cannot become independent learners by sheer willpower. It is not just a matter of grit or **mindset**. Grit and mindset are necessary but not sufficient by themselves. We have to help dependent students develop new cognitive skills and habits of mind that will actually increase their brainpower. Students with increased brainpower can accelerate their own learning, meaning they know how to learn new content and improve their weak skills on their own.

While the achievement gap has created the epidemic of dependent learners, **culturally responsive teaching** (CRT) is one of our most powerful tools for helping students find their way out of the gap. A systematic approach to culturally responsive teaching is the perfect catalyst to stimulate the brain's neuroplasticity so that it grows new brain cells that help students think in more sophisticated ways.

I define **culturally responsive teaching** simply as . . .

An educator's ability to recognize students' cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective **information processing**. All the while, the educator understands the importance of being in a relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that culturally responsive education can strengthen student connectedness with school and enhance learning (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Tatum, 2009).

There has been a lot written about cultural responsiveness as part of the current reform agenda. As a teacher educator, I see teacher

This does not resonate with me for my own practice but I'm not disqualifying it.

but clearly it is about the teacher's mindset

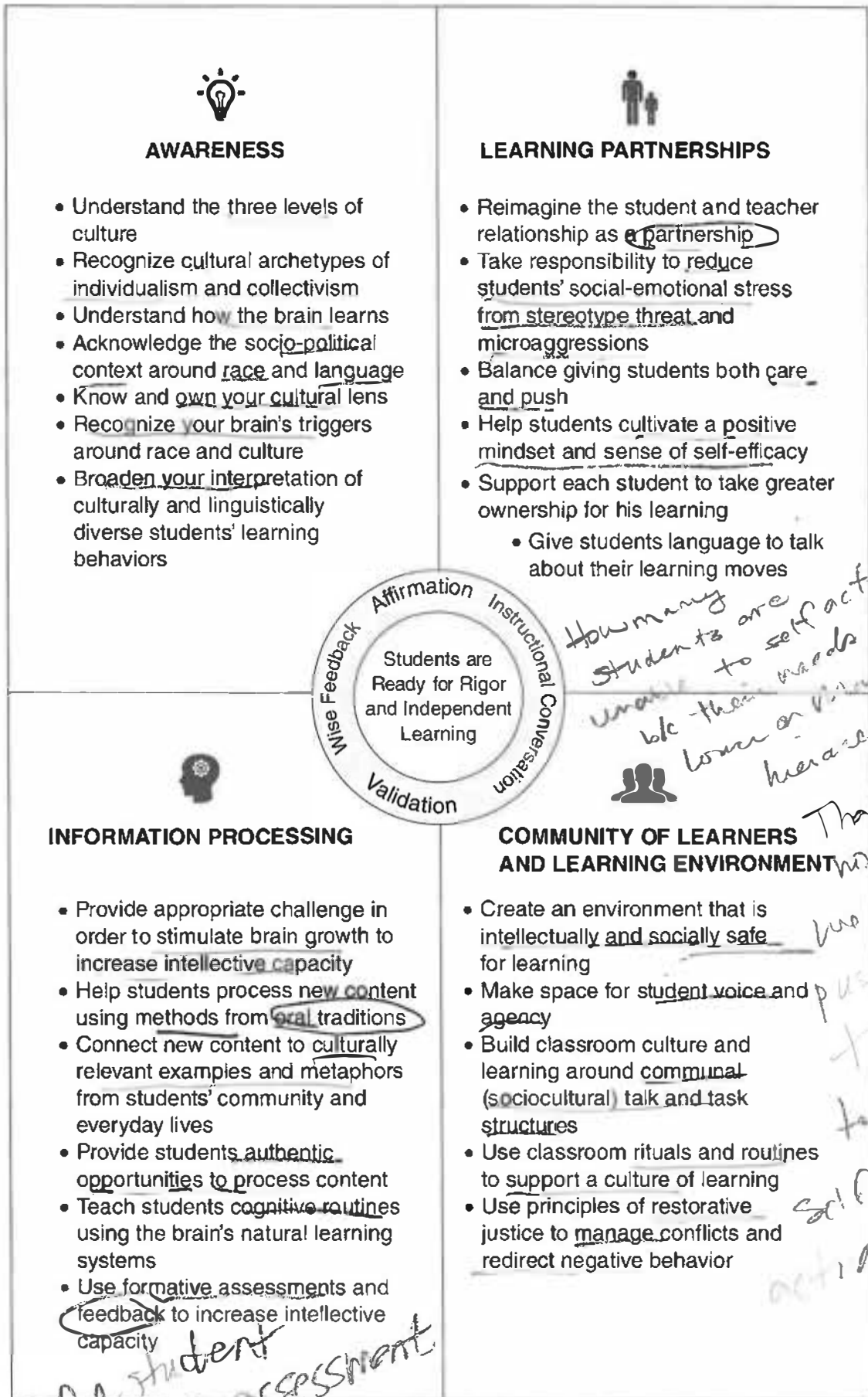
education programs pushing to include cultural responsiveness in their list of competencies for beginning teachers. Many states require teachers to have some type of cross-cultural, language, and academic development (CLAD) certification. Teacher induction programs that support new teachers in their first years in the classroom try to cover the topic in their beginning teacher mentoring programs. Most school districts only offer teachers one-shot professional development “trainings” with little or no continued support. Too often, culturally responsive teaching is promoted as a way to reduce behavior problems or motivate students, while downplaying or ignoring its ability to support rigorous cognitive development.

THE MARRIAGE OF NEUROPLASTICITY AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

I can't tell you the number of times someone has asked me for the culturally responsive “cheat sheet” for working with African American, Latino, or even Middle Eastern students. A good number of teachers who have asked me about cultural responsiveness think of it as a “bag of tricks.” Far from being a bag of tricks, culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogical approach firmly rooted in learning theory and cognitive science. When used effectively, culturally responsive pedagogy has the ability to help students build **intellective capacity**, also called *fluid intelligence* (Ritchhart, 2002) and *intellective competence* (Gordon, 2001; National Study Group for the Affirmative Development of Academic Ability, 2004). **Intellective capacity is the increased power the brain creates to process complex information more effectively.** Neuroscience tells us that culture plays a critical role in this process. That's why it is so important for culturally responsive teachers to be well-versed in brain science and cultural understanding.

Beyond knowing the brain science, the biggest challenge I see teachers struggling with is how to operationalize culturally responsive pedagogical principles into culturally responsive teaching practices. It means understanding the basic concepts of culturally responsive pedagogy (Hernandez-Sheets, 2009; Nieto, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and then learning the instructional moves associated with them. The Ready for Rigor framework is designed to help teachers do just that with the aid of neuroscience to deepen your understanding (Figure 1.2). This simple framework organizes key areas of teacher capacity building that set the stage for helping students move from being dependent learners to self-directed, independent learners.

Figure 1.2 Ready for Rigor Framework



THE FOUR PRACTICE AREAS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

Learning to put culturally responsive teaching into operation is like learning to rub your head and pat your stomach at the same time. This move feels a bit awkward at first because you have to get your hands to perform two different movements in unison. The trick is to get each movement going independently then synchronizing them into one rhythmic motion. The practices are only effective when done together. In unison they create a synergetic effect. The Ready for Rigor framework lays out four separate practice areas that are interdependent. When the tools and strategies of each area are blended together, they create the social, emotional, and cognitive conditions that allow students to more actively engage and take ownership of their learning process.

The framework is divided into four core areas. The individual components are connected through the principles of brain-based learning:

Practice Area I: Awareness

Successfully teaching students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds—especially students from historically marginalized groups—involves more than just applying specialized teaching techniques. It means placing instruction within the larger sociopolitical context. In this first practice area, we explore the development of our sociopolitical lens. Every culturally responsive teacher develops a sociopolitical consciousness, an understanding that we live in a racialized society that gives unearned privilege to some while others experience unearned disadvantage because of race, gender, class, or language. They are aware of the role that schools play in both perpetuating and challenging those inequities. They are also aware of the impact of their own cultural lens on interpreting and evaluating students' individual or collective behavior that might lead to low expectations or undervaluing the knowledge and skills they bring to school. Mastering this practice area helps teachers

- Locate and acknowledge their own sociopolitical position
- Sharpen and tune their cultural lens
- Learn to manage their own social-emotional response to student diversity

Practice Area II: Learning Partnerships

The second practice area focuses on building trust with students across differences so that the teacher is able to create a social-emotional partnership for deeper learning. Culturally responsive teachers take advantage of the fact that our brains are wired for connection. As they move through the work in this area, teachers build capacity to

- Establish an authentic connection with students that builds mutual trust and respect
- Leverage the trust bond to help students rise to higher expectations
- Give feedback in emotionally intelligent ways so students are able to take it in and act on it
- Hold students to high standards while offering them new intellectual challenges

Practice Area III: Information Processing

The third practice area focuses on knowing how to strengthen and expand students' intellectual capacity so that they can engage in deeper, more complex learning. The culturally responsive teacher is the conduit that helps students process what they are learning. They mediate student learning based on what they know about how the brain learns and students' cultural models. This practice area outlines the process, strategies, tactics, and tools for engaging students in high-leverage social and instructional activities that over time build higher order thinking skills. Moving through this area, teachers learn how to

- Understand how culture impacts the brain's information processing
- Orchestrate learning so it builds student's brain power in culturally congruent ways
- Use brain-based information processing strategies common to oral cultures

Practice Area IV: Community Building

In the fourth practice area, we focus on creating an environment that feels socially and intellectually safe for dependent learners to stretch themselves and take risks. Too often, we think of the physical setup of our classroom as being culturally "neutral" when in reality it is often an extension of the teacher's worldview or the dominant culture. The culturally responsive teacher tries to create an environment that communicates

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care, support, and belonging in ways that students recognize. As they move through this practice area, teachers understand how to

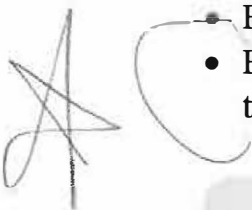
- Integrate universal cultural elements and themes into the classroom
- Use cultural practices and orientations to create a socially and intellectually safe space
- Set up rituals and routines that reinforce self-directed learning and academic identity

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The achievement gap has denied underserved students of color and English learners opportunities to develop the cognitive skills and processes that help them become independent learners.
- Culturally responsive teaching is a powerful tool to help dependent learners develop the cognitive skills for higher order thinking.
- Culturally responsive teaching uses the brain principles from neuroscience to mediate learning effectively.
- The Ready for Rigor framework helps us operationalize culturally responsive teaching.

INVITATION TO INQUIRY

- How is your school addressing the needs of low-performing students of color?
- How do you support struggling students to become independent learners?
- How have you and your colleagues operationalized the principles of culturally responsive teaching?



GOING DEEPER

To deepen your knowledge, here are some books, reports, and articles I would recommend:

- *All Students Reaching the Top: Strategies for Closing Academic Achievement Gaps* by the National Study Group for the Affirmative Development of Academic Ability.
- *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future* by Linda Darling-Hammond.

What's Culture Got to Do with It?

2

Understanding the Deep Roots of Culture

Preservation of one's own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures.

—Cesar Chavez, Mexican American Activist

We often talk about the problem of the achievement gap in terms of race—racial relations, issues of oppression and equity—while ironically the solutions for closing students' learning gaps in the classroom lie in tapping into their culture. But just why and how we use culture to close learning gaps remains vague for many teachers and seems counterintuitive for others who may have been taught not to focus on differences and, instead, be “color-blind.” The question—what's culture got to do with it?—is an important one culturally responsive teachers need to be able to answer. In this chapter, we highlight the first practice area of the Ready for Rigor framework: *Awareness*. Just as students need to have rich background for comprehension and problem solving, teachers need adequate background knowledge and usable information in order to know how to apply culturally responsive tools and strategies. Building background knowledge begins with becoming knowledgeable about the dimensions of culture as well as knowledgeable about the larger social, political, and economic conditions that create inequitable education outcomes. In addition to awareness of how culture is constructed or the

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impact of larger social and political forces on learning, teachers also have to be aware of their beliefs regarding equity and culture. Building background knowledge and awareness is one of the critical objectives of the first practice area of the framework.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Culture, it turns out, is the way that every brain makes sense of the world. That is why everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, has a culture. Think of culture as software for the brain's hardware. The brain uses cultural information to turn everyday happenings into meaningful events. If we want to help dependent learners do more higher order thinking and problem solving, then we have to access their brain's cognitive structures to deliver culturally responsive instruction.

So, in this chapter, we start with building our awareness of the three levels of culture.

Levels of Culture

Culture operates on a surface level, an intermediate or shallow level, and a deep level.

Surface culture

This level is made up of observable and concrete elements of culture such as food, dress, music, and holidays. This level of culture has a low emotional charge so that changes don't create great anxiety in a person or group.

Shallow culture

This level is made up of the unspoken rules around everyday social interactions and norms, such as courtesy, attitudes toward elders, nature of friendship, concepts of time, personal space between people, nonverbal communication, rules about eye contact, or appropriate touching. It's at this level of culture that we put into action our deep cultural values. Nonverbal communication that builds **rappport** and trust between people comes out of shallow culture. This level has a strong emotional charge. At the same time, at this level we interpret certain behaviors as disrespectful, offensive, or hostile. Social violation of norms at this level can cause mistrust, distress, or social friction.

Deep culture

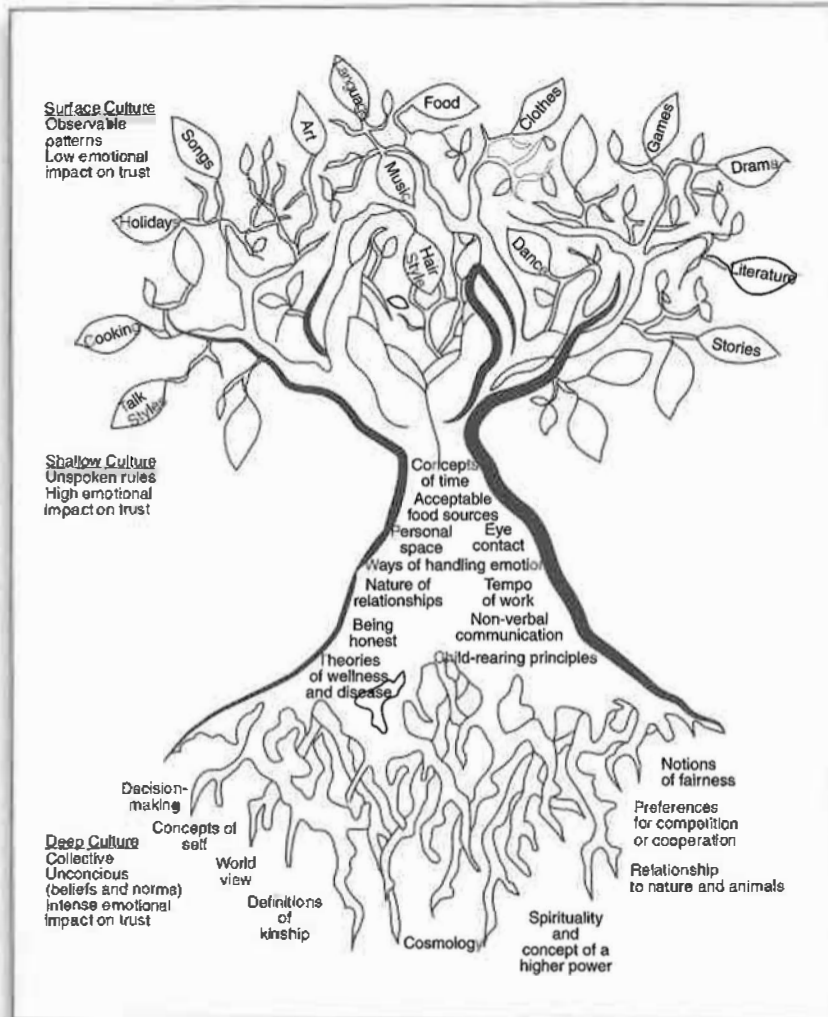
This level is made up of tacit knowledge and unconscious assumptions that govern our worldview. It also contains the cosmology (view of good or bad) that guides ethics, spirituality, health, and theories of group harmony (i.e., competition or cooperation). Deep culture also governs how we learn new information. Elements at this level have an intense emotional charge. **Mental models** at this level help the brain interpret threats or rewards in the environment. Challenges to cultural values at this level produce culture shock or trigger the brain's fight or flight response.

At the deep cultural level, our brain is encoding itself with the particular worldview we will carry into our formative years. Two people from different cultures can look at the same event and have very different reactions to it because of the meaning they attach to the event based on their deep culture. For example, in Eastern culture, the color red means good luck while in most Western cultures red means danger. While every person's individual culture evolves as we grow up and experience the world, our core mental models stay with us. My grandmother had a saying, "you can take the boy out of the country but you can't take the country out of the boy." The point is that one's culture, especially one's deep cultural roots, is part of how the brain makes sense of the world and helps us function in our environment. This worldview continues to guide our behaviors even when we change our geography. We call these mental models **schema**.

Think of mental models as parts of an elaborate "tree of knowledge" inside our brains. Schema represent the pieces of inert information we've taken in, interpreted, and categorized, based on our deep cultural norms, beliefs, and ways of being. Schema help us create background knowledge or what researcher Luis Moll and his colleagues (2005) call *funds of knowledge*, the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133). Another way of understanding schema is to think of it as a set of conceptual scripts that guide our comprehension of the world. For example, think about going to a restaurant. By just thinking about it, you activated your schema for restaurants. Images, smells, tastes, experiences involving food, how to order, and how to behave in that environment come immediately to mind without any effort. We make sense of the world around us by creating these schema scripts based on our deep culture. They are the brain's software that directs its hardware.

When talking about culture, people often represent the three levels of culture as an iceberg, with surface culture as the tip of the iceberg, shallow culture located just below the water line, and deep culture the largest

Figure 2.1 Culture Tree



Source: Illustration by Aliza Maynard.

tem of a tree. It is what grounds the individual and nourishes his mental health. It is the bedrock of self-concept, group identity, approaches to problem solving, and decision making.

BUT I HAVE 19 DIFFERENT CULTURES IN MY CLASSROOM!

“I have 19 different cultures represented in my classroom. Do I have to learn about the customs, foods, and beliefs of 19 different cultures?” This is the question I always get from teachers new to culturally responsive teaching. The key to understanding how culture guides the brain during culturally responsive teaching lies in focusing on deep culture. Rather than focus on the visible “fruits” of culture—dress, food, holidays, and

part hidden deep in the water. Rather than use the metaphor of an iceberg, I like to compare culture to a tree. A tree is part of a bigger ecosystem that shapes and impacts its growth and development. Shallow culture is represented in the trunk and branches of the tree while we can think of surface culture as the observable fruit that the tree bears. Surface and shallow culture are not static; they change and shift over time as social groups move around and ethnic groups intermarry, resulting in a cultural mosaic just as branches and fruit on a tree change in response to the seasons and its environment. Deep culture is like the root system

heroes—we have to focus on the roots of culture: worldview, core beliefs, and group values. The answer to this question comes from understanding universal patterns across cultures. I call these similarities **cultural archetypes**. While cultures might be different at the surface and shallow levels, at the root of different cultures there are common values, worldviews, and practices that form these archetypes. The term *archetype* has its origins in ancient Greek. It comes from the root word *archein*, which means “original or old” and the word *typos*, which means “pattern, model, or type.” While there might be a number of different cultures represented in one’s classroom, when we look closer, we see patterns that unite some cultures. Understanding these cultural archetypes can make culturally responsive teaching more manageable in a diverse classroom. Cultural archetypes give us a starting point.

Cultural Archetypes

There are two cultural archetypes that I think are important for the culturally responsive teacher to know.

Collectivism and Individualism

A common cultural archetype connected with deep culture is a group’s orientation toward either collectivism or individualism (Figure 2.2). Collectivism and individualism reflect fundamentally different ways the brain organizes itself. Turns out our brains are wired to favor a communal view of the world. Humans have always sought to be in community with each other because it enhanced our chances of survival. We shared workloads and resources. Over time, our brains became hardwired toward working and living cooperatively. As people moved from rural communities to urban communities, they became less communal and more individualistic. Dutch sociologist, Geert Hofstede found that approximately 20% of the world has an individualistic culture, while the other 80% practice a collectivist culture (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Most European cultures were rooted in an individualistic mindset, while the collectivist worldview is common among Latin American, Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and many Slavic cultures (Figure 2.3). Collectivistic societies emphasize relationships, interdependence within a community, and cooperative learning. Individualistic societies emphasize individual achievement and independence.

In America, the dominant culture is individualistic, while the cultures of many African American, Latino, Pacific Islander, and Native American communities lean more toward collectivism. Across these communities, how collectivism is expressed varies. What might be acceptable in one

Figure 2.2 Features of Individualist and Collectivist Cultures

Individualism	Collectivism
Focused on independence and individual achievement	Focused on interdependence and group success
Emphasizes self-reliance and the belief that one is supposed to take care of himself to get ahead	Emphasizes reliance on the collective wisdom or resources of the group and the belief that group members take care of each other to get ahead
Learning happens through individual study and reading	Learning happens through group interaction and dialogue
Individual contributions and status are important	Group dynamics and harmony are important
Competitive	Collaborative
Technical/Analytical	Relational

collectivist-oriented community might not be acceptable in another. What does stay the same is the focus on relationships and cooperative learning.

I don't want to stereotype cultures into an oversimplified frame but to simply offer the archetypes of collectivism and individualism as a way of understanding the general cultural orientation among diverse students in the classroom. We recognize that individualism and collectivism exist on a continuum. Some cultures are individualistic with little or no collectivistic elements, while others might be primarily collectivistic with strong elements of individualism. It is simply a starting point for building on the shared culture of your students.

Review Hofstede's list in Figure 2.3 and notice the difference between the United States' highly individualistic dominant culture and the highly collectivist cultures of many Latin and African countries, where our students have their roots. For example, the United States has an individualism index of 91 out of 100, meaning our dominant cultural messages and norms revolve around a self-reliance "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mindset, with a strong focus on competition and self-promotion. On the other hand, a country such as Guatemala with an individualism index of 6 leans more toward a communal culture that downplays self-promotion in favor of promoting harmony and interdependence in the family or workplace above all else. One can see there is a cultural mismatch between the typical American culture that's focused on individual personal achievement and recognition and the typical Guatemalan culture that puts a premium on being in a positive relationship with others as a foundation for business, learning, and social interaction.

Figure 2.3 The Individualism-Collectivism Continuum

The Cultural Dimensions Index was created by cultural psychologist, Geert Hofstede. Countries are evaluated on a 100-point scale in seven dimensions. One dimension is the level of individualism within a society. At the high end of the scale are extremely individualist cultures (self-oriented, individual effort favored in business and learning, competition over cooperation) while a lower number signals a more collectivist culture (group orientation, relationships essential to business and learning, and cooperation over competition).

Country	Score	Country	Score
United States	91	United Arab Emirates	38
Australia	90	Turkey	37
United Kingdom	89	Uruguay	36
Netherlands	80	Greece	35
New Zealand	79	Philippines	32
Italy	76	Mexico	30
Belgium	75	Tanzania	27
Denmark	74	Ethiopia	27
France	71	Kenya	27
Sweden	71	Portugal	27
Ireland	70	Zambia	27
Norway	69	Malaysia	26
Switzerland	68	Hong Kong	25
Germany	67	Chile	23
South Africa	65	China	20
Finland	63	Ghana	20
Poland	60	Nigeria	20
Czech Republic	58	Sierra Leone	20
Austria	55	Singapore	20
Hungary	55	Thailand	20
Israel	54	El Salvador	19
Spain	51	South Korea	18
India	48	Taiwan	17
Argentina	41	Peru	16
Japan	41	Costa Rica	15
Iran	41	Indonesia	14
Jamaica	39	Pakistan	14
Brazil	38	Colombia	13
Egypt	38	Venezuela	12
Iraq	38	Panama	11
Kuwait	38	Ecuador	8
Lebanon	38	Guatemala	6
Saudi Arabia	38		

Oral and Written Traditions

Two other important cultural archetypes to keep in mind are written and oral traditions. Some cultures have relied on the spoken word rather than the written word to convey, preserve, and reproduce knowledge from generation to generation. By telling stories and coding knowledge into songs, chants, proverbs, and poetry, groups with a strong oral tradition record and sustain their cultures and cultural identities by word of mouth. The oral tradition places a heavy emphasis on relationships because the process connects the speaker and listener in a communal experience. In contrast, a written tradition does not require much person-to-person interaction or dialogue because thoughts are committed to print.

In addition, an oral tradition makes the most of the brain's memory systems by using alliteration, movement, and emotion as strong cognitive anchors. Performance-based practices such as dancing and drumming are also used to encode knowledge.

Although most oral cultures now use reading and writing as tools for documentation and communication in formal settings, many still rely on their oral traditions at home and in their immediate communities. This situation reinforces the brain's preference for processing information through traditional oral methods.

NAMING THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

In addition to recognizing the cultural archetypes operating among culturally and linguistically diverse students, the culturally responsive teacher also has to be able to name and acknowledge the larger sociopolitical context schools operate within. Teacher educators, Villegas and Lucas (2002) identified six characteristics of culturally responsive educators and put understanding the sociopolitical context as one of the most important. The **sociopolitical context** is a term used to describe the series of mutually reinforcing policies and practices across social, economic, and political domains that contribute to disparities and unequal opportunities for people of color in housing, transportation, education, and health care, to name a few. These unequal opportunities result in unequal outcomes along racial and class lines.

For example, we see redlining by banks that make it nearly impossible for people living in predominately Black communities to get a mortgage because of income, or gerrymandering of political districts to reduce the political influence of communities of color, or the dumping

of toxic wastes in low-income communities that contribute to high cancer mortality rates because there is no access to quality health care. According to Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (2013), there are two key components of the sociopolitical context: *implicit racial bias and structural racialization*. Together they reinforce each other like bookends and hold a system of inequality in place that doesn't require overt racism or any racist actors at all to maintain it. As a result, inequality doesn't look like the Jim Crow laws of the pre-Civil Rights era. Instead, it takes the form of seemingly benign institutional practices or structures that reduce and limit opportunities for people of color, poor people, and immigrants.

Implicit bias refers to the unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that shape our responses to certain groups. Implicit bias operates involuntarily, often without one's awareness or intentional control, which is different from explicit racism. It is important to understand that implicit bias is not just overt racism that's hidden on purpose. Implicit bias is not implicit racism. Why we engage in implicit bias is rooted in neuroscience and related to our brain's efforts to process large amounts of incoming data by using its shortcut we know as stereotyping. Even educators who have taken an explicit social justice or progressive stance have implicit bias based on their exposure to the dominant culture's messages and memes over a lifetime. In the next chapter, we will learn more about how the brain does this, but what's important here to recognize is that implicit bias is directly related to how our brains are wired and seems so "normal" that these bias messages often go unchecked within the larger society (Kirwan Institute, 2013).

The other bookend holding the sociopolitical context in place is **structural racialization**. If we look at our society as a complex system of organizations, institutions, individuals, processes, and policies, we can see how many factors interact to create and perpetuate social, economic, and political structures that are harmful to people of color and to our society as a whole. Housing, education, and health are just a few areas where distribution of material resources, quality of service, and access still result in opportunity being distributed along racial lines. Understanding structural racialization goes beyond finding intent—proof of racism—within our social, economic, political, and medical institutions. Structural racialization is deeply connected to the relationship between where one lives and how location and geography affect one's access to education and job opportunities, as well as other quality-of-life factors.

To understand structural racialization, we have to move beyond one-dimensional, linear explanations of inequity in society and education.



We have to entertain the idea that a series of seemingly benign or supposedly well-intended policies actually create a negative cumulative and reinforcing effect that supports, rather than dismantles, the status quo within institutions. The impact of structural racialization across institutions over time creates a domino effect that leads to unearned disadvantages that obscure the real source of the inequity. For example, prior to No Child Left Behind, school districts across the country were concerned with the fact that, in the United States, African American students were not performing as well as White students on standardized tests. The statement was factually correct. So we designed No Child Left Behind to focus on closing the gap in test scores between Black and White students because we believed we needed to help children of color and English learners better prepare for the test. So “teaching to the test” to cover subject matter content better became the primary focus in many classrooms.

Still more than a decade later the achievement gap persists, especially with regard to students’ ability to do higher order analytical work. Our focus was on helping students become better test takers rather than on looking at the interplay of social and institutional practices that negatively impact African American children so that they didn’t develop the skills to do independent learning or higher order thinking, both of which are needed to excel on standardized tests.

Policy makers were not willing to look beyond that overly simplistic symptom of the achievement gap, test scores. Research findings pointed to the domino effect resulting from the lack of federally funded quality childcare and preschool for children of color, 0–5 years old living in urban and rural communities. We know quality daycare and preschool experiences contribute to optimum brain growth and rich vocabulary development. Access to quality daycare, child and maternal health services, and jobs that paid a living wage all contribute to children starting school academically and socially ready. The Harlem Children’s Zone, with its comprehensive approach to health, education, and job development, was actually set up as a direct response to the structural racialization that negatively impacted children in that community long before they went to school.

Structural racialization doesn’t happen just outside of school. The school-to-prison pipeline is actually a manifestation of structural racialization. We see it in the way we make staffing decisions in education. Often, underresourced urban schools are staffed by new teachers or teachers deemed “less effective” (Education Trust, 2006). Highly effective teachers are “rewarded” with teaching assignments to high performing schools or

gifted and talented classes. We routinely put the less experienced teachers with the neediest students. No other profession does this. A challenging medical case gets the attention of top specialists and skilled surgeons. It would be considered malpractice to put someone unskilled or new to the profession on a complicated medical case. Yet, in education, we subject our neediest dependent learners to inadequate instruction given their needs, or we allow them to lose valuable instructional time because of questionable discipline practices. As a result, culturally and linguistically diverse students don't develop the skills, vocabulary, or background knowledge necessary to be ready for rigor.

We see this acutely in the area of reading. By third grade, many culturally and linguistically diverse students are one or more years behind in reading. We know that each year they will fall further behind in both advanced reading skills and content knowledge because of the system's failure to prevent or close small learning gaps in earlier grades. By middle school, most schools don't know how to address struggling seventh and eighth graders with basic decoding and low fluency problems in reading.

Over time, because of structural racialization in education, we have seen a new type of intellectual apartheid happening in schools, creating dependent learners who cannot access the curriculum and independent learners who have had the opportunity to build the cognitive skills to do deep learning on their own. Rather than stepping back, looking at the ways we structure inequity in education, and interrupting these practices, we simply focus on creating short-term solutions to get dependent students of color to score high on each year's standardized tests. We don't focus on building their intellectual capacity so that they can begin to fill their own learning gaps with proper scaffolding.

SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT VERSUS THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

Some educators confuse the concept of the sociopolitical context with the popular notion of a culture of poverty. As a part of being aware as a culturally responsive teacher it is critical to understand the difference. I bumped up against this confusion during a monthly seminar my colleague and I were leading for a group of 60 BTSA (Beginning Teacher Support Assessment) support providers at the Santa Clara Office of Education in California. That month's seminar focused on how to coach beginning teachers to be culturally responsive. I was explaining how signs of

affirmation can show up even in kindergarten classrooms by making sure that there are simple things on hand such as multicultural crayons and construction paper. A hand quickly shot up. A veteran teacher and long time BTSA support provider said that she thought a better strategy would be to teach “these low-income kids” to mix the crayons instead because they won’t have these special multicultural crayons at home because their parents don’t invest in educational supplies. I was a bit stunned by her comment. After I took a few deep breaths to calm myself, I asked her what she based her suggestion on. She told me she’d learned this from Ruby Payne’s framework for teaching children in poverty. Poor people, she’d learned, are really resourceful because that’s part of their culture of poverty. Several others in the room nodded.

As a learning community, we took some time to unpack the difference between the culture of poverty and the sociopolitical context. Paul Gorski of EdChange (2008) offers an insightful commentary on the myth of the culture of poverty. He suggests that the idea of a culture of poverty reinforces stereotypes of poor families, a disproportionate number who are families of color, as unmotivated, not caring about education, or involved in illegal activities as a lifestyle choice. There’s considerable research that clearly states that people in poverty are not, in fact, lazier, less likely to value education, or more likely to be substance abusers than their wealthier counterparts. Yet, implicit racial bias reinforces the notion of people of color willingly living in poverty or unmotivated to change their circumstances. This view ignores the contributing factors of structural racialization in society that limit a family’s economic and educational opportunities. Culturally responsive teachers acknowledge the impact of the sociopolitical context on children of color and their families.

Here are three key points we need to keep in mind regarding this so-called culture of poverty:

Poverty is not a culture. Most families are trapped in poverty and do not willingly embrace it as a way of life. Most poor families experience generational poverty because of the lack of opportunities for moving out of poverty. Most poor families hold down at least one full-time job. We call these families the working poor. In economics, they refer to it as the *cycle of poverty*—a set of factors or events by which poverty, once started, is likely to continue unless there is strong outside intervention. The cycle of poverty has been defined as a phenomenon where poor families become trapped in poverty for at least three generations (i.e., for enough time that the family includes no surviving ancestors who possess and can transmit the intellectual, social, and cultural capital necessary to stay out of or escape poverty).

It is a condition or symptom of the structural inequities built into our social and economic systems. Poverty for most families is not a lifestyle choice. Poverty doesn't fit the definition of culture in that it doesn't have deep cultural roots governed by a cosmology or worldview.

Coping skills are mistaken for norms and beliefs. What appears to be a “culture”—norms, beliefs, and behaviors that are transmitted from one generation to another—are more accurately coping and survival mechanisms that help marginalized communities navigate what Alexander in *The New Jim Crow* calls racial and economic caste systems. The experience of African Americans and *Latinos* living in poverty is no different than the experience of those living through the Great Depression or major military conflicts. The only difference is those experiences were temporary, so the coping mechanisms did not become codified.

Poor people do not normalize or glorify negative aspects of living in poverty. Despite images we commonly see in the popular media, behaviors such as drug use, violence, or out of wedlock births are not normalized and embraced as lifestyle choices by poor people. Often these behaviors are an outgrowth of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Dr. Victor Carrion and his colleagues (2007) of Stanford's Early Life Stress Research Program point out that as many as one-third of children living in our country's urban neighborhoods have PTSD—nearly twice the rate reported for troops returning from war zones in Iraq.

The primary reason I think the idea of a culture of poverty is incompatible with culturally responsive teaching is because it promotes deficit thinking. Deficit thinking defines students and their families by their weaknesses rather than their strengths, suggesting that these weaknesses stem from low intelligence, poor moral character, or inadequate social skills. At its core, the culture of poverty theory says that poor people are responsible for their lot in life because of their individual and collective deficiencies (Collins, 1988). It does not acknowledge the impact of institutionalized racism, structural racialization, skin color privilege, or language discrimination.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MOVING DEPENDENT LEARNERS AND BUILDING INTELLECTIVE CAPACITY

Understanding culture, recognizing cultural archetypes, and recognizing the sociopolitical context are about laying the foundation for being a culturally responsive teacher. Recognizing how we have created intellectual

apartheid in schools is the first step in knowing how to build intellectual capacity. Getting dependent students of color ready for rigor begins with our awareness of current reality and acknowledgment of our past racial history. This understanding will give us a better context for supporting the social-emotional needs of dependent learners.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Deep culture, not the heroes and holidays of surface culture is at the core of culturally responsive teaching. Culture acts as our brain's software.
- One of the key ways to reduce confusion about how to attend to all the different cultures represented in my classroom is to first identify which cultural archetype dominates—individualism or collectivism.
- The themes of relationships and group interdependence are central to collectivist culture. Collectivist values and practices are expressed differently within different collectivist cultures.
- Culture isn't the only thing that needs to be considered when planning for culturally responsive teaching. The sociopolitical context also shapes the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students.
- Implicit bias and structural racialization are current realities that undergird life opportunities for families of color. Structural racialization doesn't require racist actors to be true.
- There are several urban myths about the culture of poverty that have become memes in education.

strategies for diverse students

INVITATION TO INQUIRY

- What would you say are the cultural archetypes operating among your students? What cultural practices do you see enacted?
- Become observant about how individualism and collectivism are operating in your classroom or school community.
- How do you experience structural racialization? How do you believe your students experience it? What differences do you notice?

GOING DEEPER

- *Bridging Cultures Between Home and School: A Guide for Teachers* (2001) by Elise Trumbull, Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, Patricia M. Greenfield, and Blanca Quiroz

- *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities*, 10th Anniversary Edition (2009) by Sonia Nieto
- *Con Respeto: Bridging the Distances Between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools* (1996) by Guadalupe Valdes
- Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. *State of the Science: Review of Implicit Bias Research Findings*. Retrieved from: <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2014-implicit-bias.pdf>
- Harlem Children's Zone. CBS *60 Minutes* (2009). Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiO-xN6xc_w