Culturally Sustaining Practices in Four Critical Levels – Overview

The following document frames current research around culturally responsive education into four quadrants that represent practices at the following critical levels: (1) culturally sustaining schools, (2) culturally sustaining leadership, (3) culturally sustaining educators, and (4) culturally sustaining pedagogy.

These four leverage points represent components of the educational ecosystem that can be transformed by culturally sustaining practices to better serve marginalized students of color. Defining what culturally sustaining practices look like in these four levels also aids in identifying data points, situating student outcomes through an equity lens supported by culturally sustaining pedagogies, identifying capacity building needs, and creating spaces for continuous community input and support. Simply, framing leverage points as critical levels gives educational stakeholders a way quantify steps for to successfully implementing culturally sustaining practices.

Culturally Sustaining Schools

Culturally sustaining schools address fundamental equity concerns by holding high expectations for students and providing the highest levels of support for all students to succeed. Success in a culturally sustaining school is defined by preparation for college and career readiness in an environment that is supportive, is asset-conscious and fosters positive cultural identity. The school also is responsible for placing the histories of all students and families in the context of academic awareness of the contributions, struggles and individual experiences of racial/ethnic groups formerly underrepresented in curriculum and historical narratives.

Ultimately, the culturally sustaining school seeks the highest levels of achievement in an environment that transforms education to recognize that the history, struggles, achievements and contributions of the racially underrepresented populations it serves are fundamental to economic progress, cultural heritage and social dynamics of this country.

Culturally Sustaining Leadership

The culturally sustaining school leader creates policies, sets and monitors expectations, and coaches faculty to facilitate successful implementation of culturally sustaining instruction. This leader also sets standards and expectations for high academic success regardless of perceived performance abilities. This means that the campus leader creates a climate free from implicit biases toward racial/ethnical groups. This leader also centers marginalized families and communities as important in decision making, solution-seeking and key to cultural histories in the community's past.

A culturally sustaining leader does not simply provide a better multicultural education but transforms the educational environment where all students succeed and their identities are seen integral to state's and nation's history, progress and economic future.

Culturally Sustaining Educators

Educators are the first faces students see from the moment they walk into an early childhood setting to the moment they graduate. It is the experiences that educators provide that have the most impact on students and ultimately define the nature of that relationship. And in the case of students of color these experiences must be provided by educators who understand the entirety of students' experiences. The research on what educators must provide and what they must understand has grown over the past 30 years. The culturally sustaining educator moves curriculum, pedagogy and practices forward from the least effective multicultural practices of the past to practices that center democratic principles and activist practices in the context of marginalized experiences and struggles.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

In the spirit of expanding the definition of best teaching practices and pedagogy, this quadrant is based on the "Culturally Responsive Instruction Observation Protocol" (Powell, et al., 2017). CRIOP provides a framework for identifying observable behaviors of a culturally sustaining education. It is important to note that in an of themselves many of the practices described in the CRIOP have the possibility of impacting educational practices only if they are situated in the racial and ethnic context of students lived experiences. Instructors must explicitly understand that these practices are responses to systemic racism, implicit and explicit biases and power dynamics of underrepresented and oppressed groups. IDRA recommends the following CRIOP indicators found in the quadrant: Classroom Relationships, Family Collaboration, Instructional Practices and Curriculum Practices.

Framing of these quadrants was informed by IDRA's literature review on culturally sustaining practices for the AAHEC.

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