

# Educator's Voice

NYSUT'S JOURNAL OF BEST PRACTICES IN EDUCATION

VOLUME XII, 2019

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## Culturally Responsive Teaching: Celebrating Diversity in Our Schools

### *In this issue ...*

This volume takes a close look at how culturally responsive teaching is defined while providing concrete instances of schoolwide and classroom-based initiatives. The programs described herein engage educators, school building leaders and members of the community in cultivating a mindset for culturally responsive teaching, creating an optimal learning environment and reshaping curricula to better reflect the increasingly diverse populations of students being served. Consistent across them is the perspective that this seemingly daunting task can be accomplished by capitalizing on the assets students bring to the table through their unique strengths, cultural backgrounds and experiences. Authors demonstrate how to infuse culturally responsive teaching through programs that involve students in civic engagement, cultural and self-awareness, inquiry-led learning, restorative practices and multiliteracy. Throughout the issue, culturally responsive teaching is viewed as something foundational and integral to good teaching practice for all students.



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Dear Colleagues,

By the year 2040, one in three students in the US will be an immigrant or will be the child of one. Our schools continue to grow in populations of students who bring cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity to our communities while current teaching practices continue to develop accordingly. Yet the practice of culturally responsive teaching is not something brand new nor is it just another add-on to the curriculum. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is an approach that should be infused into everyday teaching. Simply said, CRT represents best practice for all students in our charge.

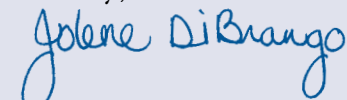
What does this look like in practice? Culturally responsive teachers create an environment where students feel respected, understood, valued and included. Teachers view their students as assets and recognize that each one comes with unique characteristics, background experiences, talents and proclivities. A culturally responsive teacher understands how to acknowledge students' backgrounds and incorporate them into the fabric of the classroom and school community.

A culturally responsive teacher helps all students to build important connections beyond the school community, between themselves and others. Beginning with connections between teacher to student, and growing toward connections between self and community, and finally expanding to connections between self and the nation and globe; CRT helps to create engaged global citizens.

A culturally responsive classroom is transformative. It encourages students to be active participants in the learning process and fosters critical and creative thinking by providing a supportive physical space where responsible risk taking is fostered, and it feels safe to question and to explore ideas together. A culturally responsive teacher works to create an accepting and inclusive community where students see themselves reflected in the daily activities and where multiple perspectives are listened to and validated.

The practices described in this volume will demonstrate how you can enhance existing teaching practices or curricula. You may find ways to adapt some of these practices by taking a piece of one and making it your own. As a culturally responsive teacher, look into any professional learning opportunities in your district that could help bolster some of these practices in your classroom. Is your district curriculum flexible and nimble enough to allow culturally responsive practices to thrive? See how you can strengthen your culturally responsive teaching to continue making a difference in the lives of your students.

Sincerely,



Jolene DiBrango

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# Educator's Voice

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## Culturally Responsive Teaching: Celebrating Diversity in Our Schools

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# Being a Culturally Responsive Teacher in a Culturally Responsive Classroom

## SUMMARY

Educators find themselves working with students who are increasingly more racially, culturally, economically and linguistically diverse. Culturally responsive instruction is a way to create an inclusive, student-centered environment that is accessible and relevant to all students. Learn ways to strengthen culturally responsive practices in the classroom and take advantage of the rich assets a broadly diverse classroom of students provides.

*Each year, school districts observe* changing populations and a growing percentage of students from diverse backgrounds. Our classrooms are increasingly becoming more culturally, economically and linguistically diverse. The Census Bureau projects the United States will become a more racially and ethnically diverse nation in the coming years, and that there will be a plurality of racial and ethnic groups. The “Two or More Races” population is projected to be the fastest growing group by 2060 with its population expected to triple in size. The Asian population follows as the second fastest-growing group, accounting for 5.4 percent of the total population (Colby and Ortman, 2015). According to Population Reference Bureau, Latinx children account for 25 percent of U.S. children under 18,

while by 2050, it is projected that they will make up 33 percent of the child population. Of the 18.2 million Latinx children, 95 percent are U.S.-born citizens. Almost 14 percent of the New York State school-age population, age 5 and older, are identified as English language learners or multilingual learners (Zong, Batalova & Burrows, 2017). For educators to meet the needs of their increasingly diverse student population, they must possess the mindset and skills needed to foster a positive learning environment for all students, which is critical to their academic success.



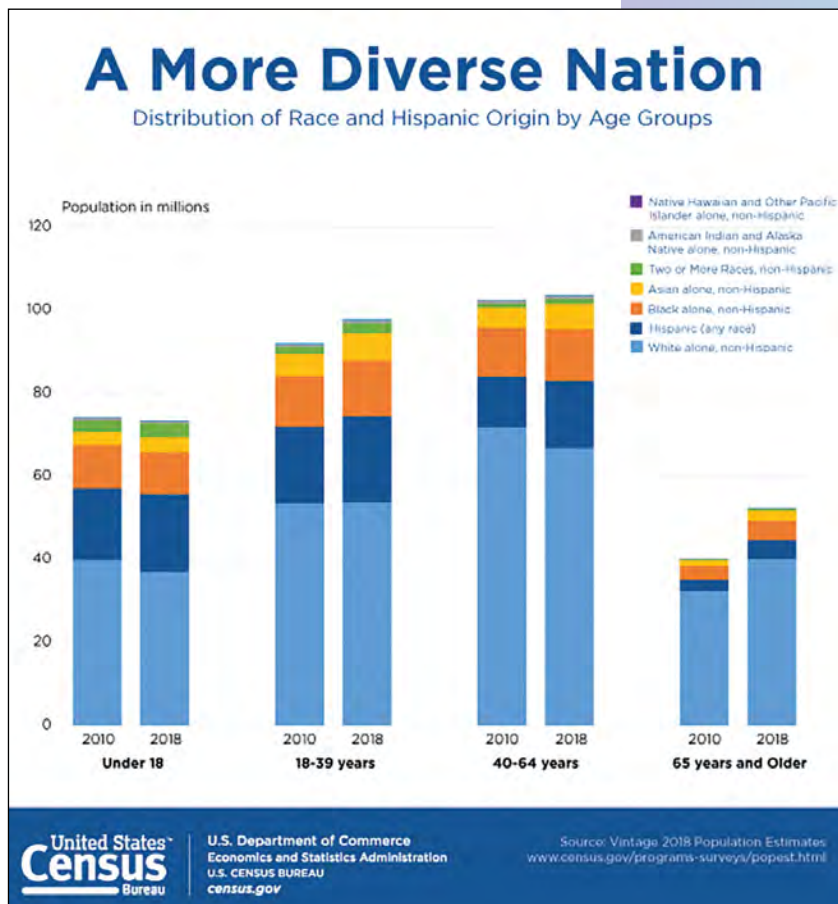
*Susan Lafond, a Nationally Board Certified Teacher in English as a New Language (EAYA/ENL), has 20 years of combined experience teaching ESL and foreign language. As an assistant in educational services with NYSUT, she focuses on regulations and educational issues related to English learners (ELs) and ENL/Bilingual programs, as well as creating and organizing professional development across the state. She has served on AFT's National English Language Learner Educator Cadre since 2004 and is a veteran AFT national trainer. Lafond is an expert practitioner and adviser to Colorin Colorado.*

## Susan Lafond, NYSUT

Culturally responsive teaching recognizes, respects, and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources of information to build from when creating optimal learning environments (Nieto, 2000). In 2016, nearly 20 million children had at least one immigrant parent, and nearly nine in 10 (89 percent or 17.7 million) of these children were citizens. About 8 percent of children with an immigrant parent live in New York (Artiga and Damico, 2017). Culturally responsive instructional practices honor and support this diversity, connecting learning to students' cultural backgrounds while building on prior experiences.

Culturally responsive teachers differentiate instruction by transforming the learning environment into an inclusive and positive space where all students see themselves and are empowered to learn. As a result, educators build relationships, hold high expectations, provide rigorous instruction, and create an inclusive, student-centered environment that is accessible and relatable to all students.

The New York State Education Department contends that the desired end results of promoting equitable opportunities that help all children thrive can only be fully attained by



integrating an equity and inclusion lens. As a result, the state's federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan conveys the goal of working with districts to ensure cultural responsiveness. The department moved forward with its commitment by partnering with The New York University Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools on an initiative to develop a guidance document for culturally responsive-sustaining education. In May 2019, NYSED released the Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework, *Journey Forward*, to help education stakeholders in developing

# Being a Culturally Responsive Teacher in a Culturally Responsive Classroom

Culturally responsive teachers begin with an open mind and a willingness to embrace different cultures in order to create a meaningful learning environment.

and implementing policies that educate all students effectively and equitably, as well as providing appropriate supports and services to promote positive student outcomes. While the framework is not without flaws, it does remind educators of the fact that our students come to us with varied experiences, backgrounds and cultures. As a resource, it offers suggestions directed to different stakeholder groups on ways to address students' diverse needs, promote equitable opportunities in which they will thrive, and empower each child to leverage his/her uniqueness as an asset.

## What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

The notion of culturally responsive education is premised on the idea that culture is central to student learning. Culturally relevant teaching is a term created by Gloria Ladson-Billings in *The Dreamkeepers* (1994). According to Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references as a vehicle in all aspects of learning. She offers effective practices by educational practitioners (teachers and leaders) who applied cultural responsiveness in their classrooms. These practices, which were exemplified by eight principles, lead to stronger connections between educators and students.

Geneva Gay stresses that culturally relevant pedagogy is imperative because it uses, "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming (Gay, 2010, p. 31).

According to Gay, culturally responsive teaching rests on six dimensions:

- Culturally responsive teachers are *socially and academically empowering* by setting high expectations for students with a commitment to every student's success;
- Culturally responsive teachers are *multidimensional* because they engage cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives;
- Culturally responsive teachers *validate every student's culture*, bridging gaps between school and home through diversified instructional strategies and multicultural curricula;
- Culturally responsive teachers are *socially, emotionally, and politically comprehensive* as they seek to educate the whole child;
- Culturally responsive teachers are *transformative of schools and societies* by using students' existing strengths to drive instruction, assessment, and curriculum design;



- Culturally responsive teachers are *emancipatory and liberating from oppressive educational practices and ideologies* as they lift “the veil of presumed absolute authority from conceptions of scholarly truth typically taught in schools (Gay, 2010, p. 38).”

Culturally responsive teachers begin with an open mind and a willingness to embrace different cultures in order to create a meaningful learning environment that incorporates students’ knowledge, experiences, and backgrounds (Saifer et al., 2011). Within this environment students are likely to feel more motivated and engaged, seeing themselves reflected in the classroom. Everyone has a culture and Saifer says that to create and maintain a culturally responsive classroom, you have to know each student well. Schools should not focus solely on one dominant culture, but instead should mirror the culture and ethnicities of the students they serve.

### **Creating a Culturally Responsive Classroom**

For educators who wish to strengthen culturally responsive practices by creating a more inclusive and equitable classroom environment, the first step is to reflect on these overarching questions: Do I understand the cultural differences of my students? Do I promote equitable opportunities in which all students will thrive? Does my classroom empower

## **Principles of Culturally Responsive Education**

**Communication of High Expectations** entails holding high academic standards and expectations for all students and believing in student capability while providing the encouragement they need to persevere.

**Active Teaching Methods** includes designing instruction to promote student engagement and encouraging students to play an active role in their own learning.

**Teacher as Facilitator** means the teacher takes on the role of guide, mediator, instructor, and advocate in order to help students effectively connect their culturally- and community-based knowledge to the learning experiences taking place in the classroom.

**Inclusion of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students** requires engaging in an ongoing dialogue with parents to learn about the child as well as involving parents so they can be effective partners in the educational process.

**Cultural Sensitivity** is a core foundation with the teacher becoming familiar with all students’ cultures and translating this knowledge into instructional practice to maximize their learning opportunities.

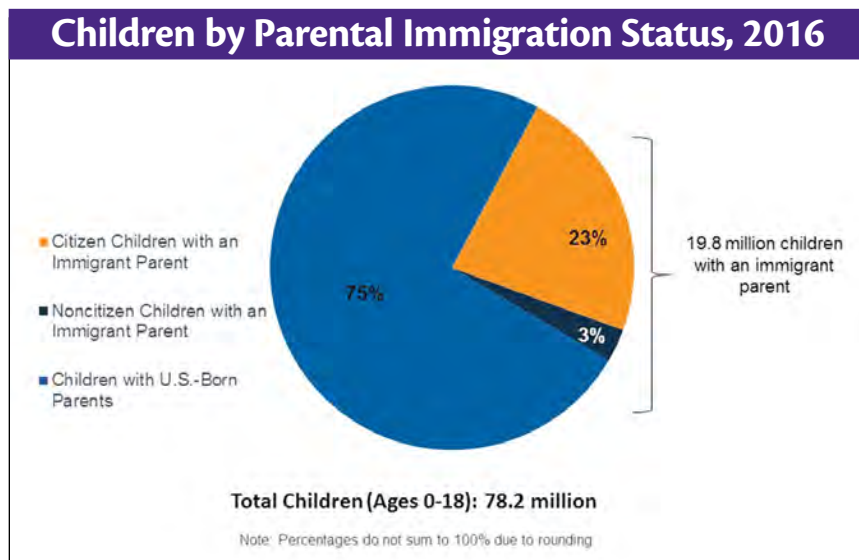
**Reshaping the Curriculum** takes Cultural Sensitivity to the next level by using a student-centered curriculum that is integrated, interdisciplinary, and meaningful in that it includes issues and topics related to the students’ background and culture and as a result, challenges students to develop higher-order thinking skills.

**Student-Controlled Classroom Discourse** empowers students by offering them the opportunity to determine aspects of the lesson and gaining insight into the ways communication skills are developed in the home and community.

**Small Group Instruction and Academically-Related Discourse** is evidenced by a classroom structure of low-pressure, student-centered learning groups that provide students the opportunity to maximize participation and the development of academic language.

— Source: Ladson-Billings, 1994

# Being a Culturally Responsive Teacher in a Culturally Responsive Classroom



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation analysis of March 2017 Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement

each child to capitalize on his/her uniqueness and leverage differences as an asset?

Continuing along that path, teachers can gauge where their classroom practices fall on a cultural competence continuum by doing a strengths-based

assessment of how they build the classroom climate and deliver an equitable, action-oriented learning experience for the students in front of them.

As you contemplate the five areas in the checklist (at left), take the time to write down a detailed list of the strategies you utilize for each of them.

## Culturally Responsive Checklist

- Create a learning environment that supports and engages diverse learners.
- Understand, accept, and celebrate the cultural differences of all students.
- Teach students to value their differences and expand their appreciation of each other.
- Take action to close the achievement gap between students in your classroom.
- Design lessons to take into consideration students' backgrounds, social experiences, prior knowledge, and learning styles.

Based on the quantity and frequency of the actions you employ, you will see where your strengths are and can begin to identify areas you may wish to target. Keep in mind that cultural competence is always evolving and something you continue to learn as you have the opportunity to work with different students over your entire teaching career.

There are many techniques for incorporating culturally diverse contributions, experiences, and perspectives into the classroom. What the models from different researchers have in common are the practices that have been shown to be effective with all students. Morrison, Robbins, and Rose (2008) synthesized the research on culturally responsive teaching and developed a list of best practices that teachers can use to support their students.

Start by creating a cooperative classroom environment and nurturing students' social emotional learning while at the same time, conveying high behavioral expectations for students that address biased or discriminatory behavior. Be willing to share power in the classroom and allow student voice to be part of the decision making. Recognize that students' lives go beyond the four walls of the classroom by encouraging strong relationships between students' family, the school, and the greater community. Educators

need to invest in and take personal responsibility for student success. There is so much more at stake here than we sometimes realize.

When it comes to instruction, meeting grade level standards is still critical, but teachers should not hesitate to reshape the prescribed curriculum to provide for a balanced study of cultural contributions and perspectives and engagement in social justice work. Tap into student strengths as starting points and build on their funds of knowledge. Doing this entails being familiar with one's students and their backgrounds and encourages family participation. To assist students with accessing a challenging curriculum, try modeling skills as a way to provide a concrete example. By scaffolding content and language, teachers bridge any gaps between what students know and are able to do and what they are expected to know and be able to do.

Before you can create an equitable classroom climate, a necessary first step is to take time to understand your own cultural identity and cultural behavioral patterns along with the impact they have on your attitude and actions at school. This is not easy as it entails being a reflective practitioner and recognizing your own biases and inequitable action. Being sensitive to differences in others provides an opportunity to step back before passing judgment. The most important

## Building a Classroom Community Includes Engaging Parents

Opportunities for Two-way Home-School Communication	Potential Benefits
Build a positive relationship with parents with scheduled calls, even before the school year begins.	Establishing rapport with family members will help to strengthen your relationships with caretakers and consequently with your students. Positive phone calls home can be a great way to create a stronger sense of community in your classroom.
Conduct a survey or needs assessment for parents on what they are looking for when it comes to their child's education.	Online surveys are easy to set up and can produce valuable data quickly and efficiently. By offering opportunities for parents to participate in these surveys when they visit the school building, it increases the chance that more parents will take part.
Set up parent-teacher-translator meetings at a convenient location, day and time for parents.	Meeting at the parents' home or a place of their choosing may help them to be comfortable, and as a result, ensure a more productive conversation.
Establish monthly events for parents to learn about navigating the school system, parent involvement, and ways they can help their child at home.	These programs establish a welcoming school community and convey a positive message about the importance of partnering to ensure students are supported in achieving educational goals.

lesson you can model to your students is to be understanding, open, honest, caring and forgiving to yourself and others.

Opportunities for two-way home-school communication should be the norm rather than the exception. While

# Being a Culturally Responsive Teacher in a Culturally Responsive Classroom

To maximize the potential of their students, teachers should become familiar with students' prior educational backgrounds and be ready to develop lessons that reflect who they are.

sending home newsletters, fliers, and other forms of messages about school and classroom activities are still important, it doesn't encourage a response or encourage involvement on the part of parents or family members.

Accept that the concerns of a parent or guardian may be different from the concerns that you have. If you are sensitive to the potential cultural differences when you speak with family members, you will find yourself asking questions that will help you determine what their goals for their child are before you attempt to impose your own beliefs.

Teachers need to hold high academic standards and expectations for all students while providing the encouragement needed to persevere. It is crucial to the success of your students that you make it clear to them that all students in your class CAN and WILL succeed.

- Teach students self-talk and goal-setting. Model both of these for students with classroom goals.
- Focus on fostering a 'growth mindset' to help students reach their full potential. This means having students understand the value of effort and persistence. A fixed mindset limits a child's success, while a growth mindset instills the idea of possibility and improvement through perseverance.

- Explain how classroom activities that are employed will help students acquire the skills and knowledge to allow them to reach those targets. The attainment of these goals and objectives is through carefully planned lessons and activities.
- Be strategic in your feedback so that students know what the criterion for success is in their classroom. Using timely and specific formative feedback provides students with opportunities to revise and improve their work. This in turn allows them to deepen their understanding and advance their own learning.

Children whose language and culture correspond more closely to that of the school may have an advantage in the learning process whereas children whose experiences are less familiar or recognized may become alienated and disengaged from the learning process. Teachers can bridge this situation by appreciating and valuing all students' cultures. To maximize the potential of their students, teachers should become familiar with students' prior educational backgrounds and be ready to develop lessons that reflect who they are. Build on your students' life experiences and consistently bring them into the classroom.

Start off the school year by providing frequent icebreakers so that you and

your students can learn about each other. Build in plenty of structured activities where students can interact in a productive way with each other so that they have an opportunity to learn about each other's cultures. As you teach content make it a priority to provide information to the students on alternative viewpoints or beliefs of a topic. But be careful that you watch for potential culture conflicts and be prepared to address or minimize them. To do that, you will need to be clear about expectations for student behavior up front so that the classroom culture you create can guide student actions and positive peer interactions in the classroom.

While a teacher plays a critical role in creating a nurturing classroom environment, it takes a village to develop a positive social climate at school and establish it as a safe place where students and staff are treated with respect. The following are suggestions to build culturally responsive schools.

- Develop clear rules and consequences for appropriate peer interaction.
- Show culturally diverse photos of role models representative of students' cultures.
- Add school lunches that are representative of the cultures of students in the district.
- Revisit the school calendar to consider important holidays from all cultures represented in district.
- Plan events for staff, families and community to learn about and honor other cultures.

## Examples of Culturally Relevant Instruction Translated into Classroom Activities

Lesson Design	Classroom Activities
Be deliberate about devising different ways for students to be successful.	Keep your striving students in mind when designing lessons. You want to ensure success and increase students' self-esteem by setting realistic, yet rigorous, goals for individual students and offer as much appropriate scaffolding as possible. For your ELLs, allow the use of the student's first language to enhance learning. Varying teaching approaches will be more accommodating to students' diverse learning styles and language proficiencies.
Put the students at the center of instruction so they are encouraged to direct their own learning and become self-confident, self-directed and proactive.	Share responsibility of instruction by having students lead discussion groups or reteach concepts. Include cooperative learning structures along with individual and whole class work.
Provide students a voice and an opportunity for decision-making in the classroom. This allows them to become more independent in action and thinking.	This can be achieved by using rubrics and self-assessment and allowing students to participate in creating them. Ask students to generate a list of topics they wish to study or research and include their choices within units.

- Begin a book club to read literature about/from students' cultures.
- Provide culturally relevant professional development for staff on an ongoing basis on related topics of cultural proficiency, cultural differences, equity issues and social justice.

# Being a Culturally Responsive Teacher in a Culturally Responsive Classroom

Classroom diversity is one of our nation's greatest assets and as educators we must do everything in our power to ensure that every child reaches his/her potential for success.

As our diverse learners enter our classrooms, they bring with them a broad spectrum of experiences, skills, knowledge and background. The role of the teacher is to create a welcoming classroom environment where students feel affirmed rather than marginalized and comfortable to take responsible risks as they learn. The classroom curriculum should be representative of a variety of perspectives, centering on the student identities and cultural pluralism despite new challenges for teachers to “reach and teach” young minds in this era of accountability. While culturally responsive teaching is not a brand new initiative and the principles are not far-reaching from what skilled educators are already doing, it will take a deliberate intentionality on the part of teachers to eliminate bias and create a caring, cooperative classroom environment with equitable opportunities on the part of all students to learn, grow and achieve. It is critical to remember that classroom diversity is one of our nation's greatest assets and as educators we must do everything in our power to ensure that every child reaches his/her potential for success.

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## RESOURCES

### Suggested Books

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### Resources to Download

[Culturally Responsive Teaching](#) — A paper from the Collaboration for Effective Educator, Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center, published in July 2014, that features an innovation configuration matrix that can guide teacher preparation professionals in the development of appropriate culturally responsive teaching content.

[Culturally Responsive Classroom Management Strategies](#) — A brief developed in 2008 by the NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development.

[Culturally Responsive Teaching](#) — Guide from Equity Assistance Center of Education Northwest offers evidence-based practices for teaching all students equitably.

### Suggested Videos

[Introduction to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy](#) — Education experts Jackie Jordan Irvine, Geneva Gay and Kris Gutierrez explain how to make culturally relevant pedagogy a reality in your classroom in this video from Teaching Tolerance.

[Culturally Responsive Teaching](#) — This video gauges the impact of culturally responsive teaching practices in a second grade classroom at a DC public charter school.



# Students as Content Creators: A Brooklyn Ethnography

## SUMMARY

Join a class of high school students as they focus on the school community itself as the primary source of content material. This article features exemplars of student-centered learning and student-led approaches to community engagement, focusing on the strategies secondary teachers can use to establish their own inquiry-led, culturally responsive classroom.

*Kenny walked into my class at HS 79*

on the first day of school, soon after celebrating his 18th birthday. Like too many other African-American teens in New York City, he had already dropped out of high school — twice. Transferring yet again, Kenny arrived on this cool September morning in a pressed shirt and tie, determined, it appeared, to make a fresh start.

Amal, already in her seat, watched Kenny as he walked into the classroom. She adjusted her hijab and returned to the “Do Now” assignment I had posted on the board: *On an index card, write your name, age, where you are from, something you enjoy learning about, and your favorite thing about school.*

Later, I would learn that Amal, a refugee from Yemen, had recently immigrated to Brooklyn, was a newcomer to American schools, and enjoyed learning English.

Eighteen students started my combined English and ENL (English as a New Language) class that day. Some were native speakers of English, while others, multilingual learners (MLLs). The students spoke nine different home languages. Nearly all had lived in poverty, whether in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, or East New York, Brooklyn.

The superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007) of this classroom was exciting and full of learning opportunities, but presented a number of challenges: How do we establish a community of learners out of this linguistically and culturally diverse group? What common materials and curriculum could possibly be relevant to all these students? What might a culturally relevant approach look like for students from so many diverse cultures?

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**David Mumper, Hudson Valley Regional Bilingual Education  
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I had taught linguistically, culturally and academically diverse students at HS 79 for five years, and this year, I was determined to try an approach that turned the “problem” on its head. Rather than starting the course with texts and materials designed to support content and language acquisition, we would begin by *creating our own content* while pursuing academic objectives. This approach reflected my affinity for culturally responsive teaching and problem-based learning (PBL), two frameworks that naturally support one another and reinforce student-centered learning. My hope was that by positioning students as content creators, experts and authors in a PBL framework, it would empower them to examine culture, identity and diversity not as barriers to individual and collaborative learning, but as a rich and generative line of inquiry that was directly connected to each of them and broader academic questions. I began by sharing the problem with students, in the form of a letter.

At the start of the second day of class, each student found an envelope with

her name on it waiting on her desk. Inside was a letter; a “hook” in the form of an invitation.

### An Invitation



*Dear Amal,*

*My name is Gareth Benfield, and I am the Editor-in-Chief of the Encyclopedia Britain. I congratulate you on being selected to contribute to the Encyclopedia. You should be proud, as you have been chosen as one of a select few authors to contribute your work. This year our feature article is called “Ethnography of a Brooklyn Community.” I would like to personally invite you to take the lead in creating an ethnography of the people in your school community. Of course, we expect, as with all our profiles, to have a healthy diversity of printed and multimedia content material. Please respond with a proposal and work plan by Wednesday, September 12, at 11:30 am. I will review your plan at that point, and provide you with my feedback next week.*

*Sincerely,  
Dr. Benfield*

Students read this initial letter — the first text they encountered in the class — in English, Spanish or French. Some students were not literate in any language so were paired with another student in order to discuss the letter together. A few students were excited right away, “This is going to be fun!” while others were confused, “I don’t get it. What are we doing?”

# Students as Content Creators: A Brooklyn Ethnography

Identifying authentic local problems which need to be solved allows learning to be maximally relevant to students.

Some started asking text-based questions, “What’s an ethnography?” By the end of class, students were working in small groups to determine exactly what the letter was asking, and how they should respond.

## **Problem-Based Learning Meets Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**

As illustrated by the first days of this unit, the posing, framing, and analysis of authentic problems are hallmarks of problem-based learning. PBL has been conceptualized in myriad ways, but in this paper, we follow the work of Lambros (2004) and her application of this model to classrooms. She asserts that PBL is a “teaching method based on the principle of using problems as the starting point for the acquisition of new knowledge (p. 2).” Central to PBL’s effectiveness is its emphasis on real-world problems, which are easily found in the students’ immediate realities in school or in their communities. Identifying authentic, pressing, local

Problem-based learning is rooted, primarily in the identification of a problem that needs to be solved, and the design of a plan to address and potentially solve that problem. Stemming from the medical model of addressing “ill-structured and messy problems”, this method encourages discussion of the problem at hand by community members. Then, through careful, critical analysis of the problem, possible solutions are offered, including the logical follow-through of necessary steps toward a resolution (Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015).

For example: a student may be concerned about the amount of garbage that her school produces. In an effort to reduce her school’s contribution to a local landfill, she discovers that hundreds of water bottles are drunk by school sports teams each season, and lacking a recycling option, those plastic bottles are thrown directly into the garbage. Her solution, then, is to design a recycling project within the school sports department to collect those water bottles, deliver them to the recycling center, and repurpose them for other use. In this scenario, problem-based learning (the school garbage problem) actually leads to project-based learning (the recycling program).

Both project-based and problem-based learning are pedagogies that are inherently student centered and fundamentally compatible with other culturally



problems which need to be solved allows learning to be maximally relevant to students, and impels them in concrete, connected ways to insert themselves in their work.

responsive practices. They center on real-world issues or topics that often have relevance to students. It is possible to craft a PBL environment by incorporating student interests, experience and cultural backgrounds. PBL allows students to engage in learning with more autonomy than traditional teaching does by building on individual needs, interests and proclivities. In a project based environment the teacher typically does less talking and spends more time facilitating. As in other culturally responsive approaches, this requires a close knowledge of both the content being explored as well as knowledge of students' backgrounds, experiences, and strengths.

The ethnography task presented here through a PBL lens encouraged students to leverage their personal experience and expertise while becoming researchers and authors with a common intellectual goal. For multilingual learners this was especially helpful as it enabled them to build academic language by connecting concepts and vocabulary to their personal experiences and identity. Students' culture, in this case, became more than a pedagogical consideration, it emerged as an inherently valuable and rich academic topic of which students already had prior knowledge.

The PBL ethnography lens has the added potential to create pathways toward culturally sustaining pedagogy for multicultural students. Originally

conceptualized by Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally relevant teaching (CRT) or pedagogy was described as a way to help students "accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate (p. 469)." The concept of CRT has evolved over time into what Paris (2012) has termed, culturally *sustaining* pedagogy, suggesting a renewed purpose to "perpetuate and foster — to sustain — linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling (p. 93)." Using culturally sustaining pedagogy as a guide, the ethnography project at HS 79 afforded an academic space where students' identities were brought to light on the students' own terms. The first task in this multidimensional project, however, was for students to decide how to answer the letter they received from Dr. Benfield.

### A Flurry of Solutions

Students were given the text (at right) as a handout:

During the next class session, we considered students' questions, starting with "What is an ethnography?" Using a simple definition, students discussed in small groups what our ethnography

**Ethnography is a research strategy that studies people, social groups and their culture. Information for an ethnography can be collected through observations, interviews, questionnaires or participation in a group.**

**The word Ethnography comes from Greek: ethnos = people, and graphia = writing**

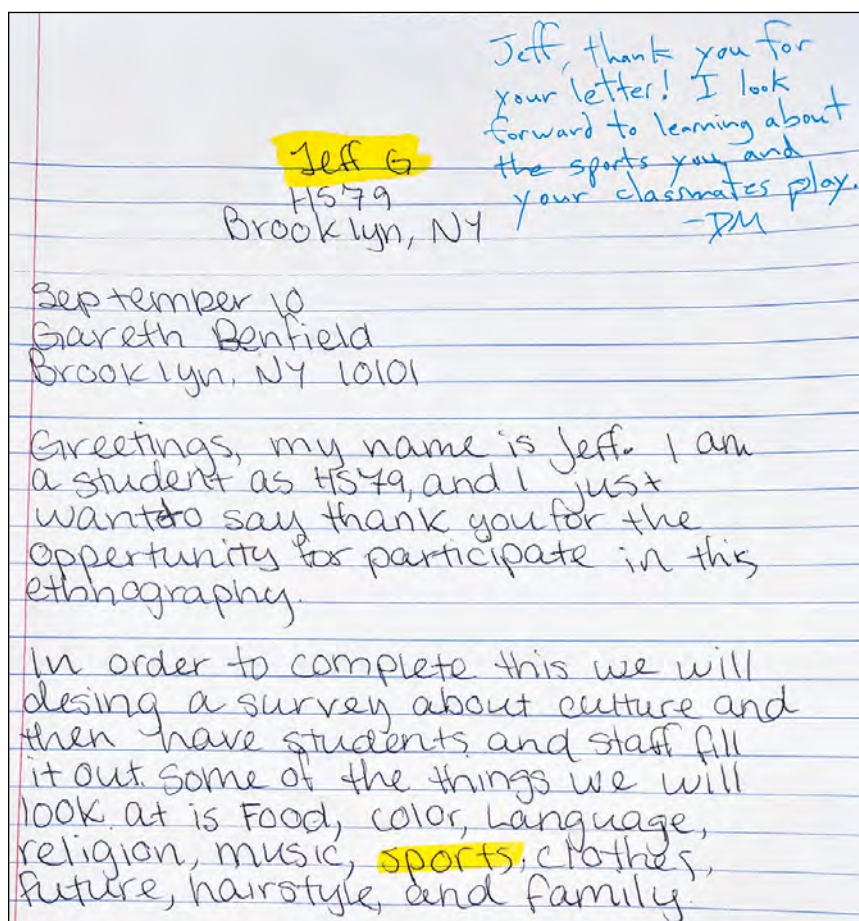
## Students as Content Creators: A Brooklyn Ethnography

could look like. For students accustomed to being told what to do, the open-ended nature of this process was difficult.

There were moments of uncertainty and silence, and questions arose, “Can we take pictures of the building? How are we supposed to find out about other kids in the school?” Instead of answering questions directly, I suggested they refer back to the invitation letter and the ethnography definition for guidance. As the teacher, I knew that students would read, write and complete other discreet assignments during the ethnography, but at this point, they were given the space to decide how to shape the work.

By the end of the period, students had a) decided to respond to the invitation with a letter describing their work plan, and b) brainstormed many of the roles and research methods that our ethnography would entail. This prepared us for the following class, the usually dreadful *writing a business letter*. Over the next few days, students drafted, edited and published a letter. They also defined and chose roles: *data collector*, *statistician*, *interviewer*, *photographer*, *editor*, and, an important last-minute addition: *web designer*. This role, which I had not initially planned for, was a result of Kenny’s crucial insight into the problem of creating an authentic and useful ethnography for our school, “Does anybody read encyclopedias these days? Why don’t we make a website so we can share it with the school and use it for New Student Orientation?” No one could argue with this idea, so a few interested students selected web designer as one of their roles.

Successful PBL requires the teacher to stick to the learning plan while adapting to new and authentic solutions, such as Kenny’s website. It is important to recognize that Kenny’s contribution was a transformative improvement, and went a long way toward solving the actual problem of student orientation. In subsequent years, we dispensed with the encyclopedia role-play and simply framed the problem as an invitation



from the district to create a rich, multi-layered ethnography for the purpose of orienting new students.

Until then, I had never seen so many at-risk and formerly disconnected teens individually and collectively excited about writing a business letter, and the reason was obvious: they were engaged in problem-solving on multiple levels. In addition to the role-playing aspect of the project (students as ethnographers for an invented encyclopedia), our project also addressed an actual problem: how do we welcome students to our school community? We needed a resource for new students who enrolled throughout the year who, up until this point, had not had the opportunity for a formal school orientation. Motivated to solve the orientation problem (which some students had experienced firsthand), students were beginning to develop an identity characterized by agency and expertise in the creation of content.

### **Development of the Ethnography Unit**

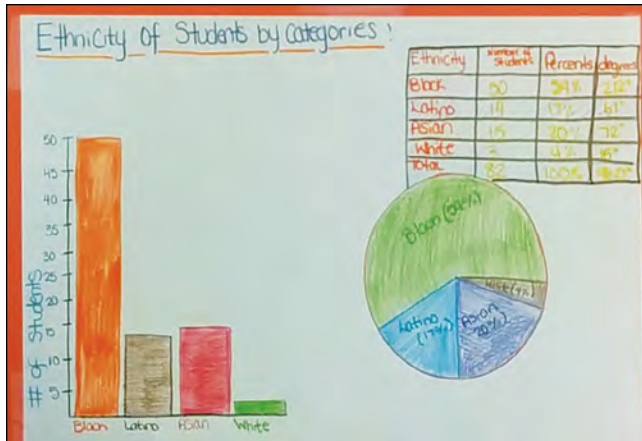
Over the next week during this start-of-year ELA/ENL unit, students worked together to engage in multiple, creative learning projects toward creating a school website for new students. These projects included: designing questions for their peers, recording and transcribing interviews in multiple languages, surveying the school

community to capture quantitative data about their classmates' age, gender, ethnicity, language, post-secondary goals, mapping their communities geographically, co-authoring and editing ethnographic vignettes, and curating and preparing these work products for publication on the website. Despite the student-directed curriculum, some of the required tasks were assessed traditionally as would be expected in an English class. Still, student input largely shaped the work at hand as they identified ways to improve the project, for example, suggesting that videotaping take place, and that interview questions be revised. Early in the data gathering phase, Amal observed that we could not accurately describe the community without including the adults in the school, and so, in an important decision that impacted our collective production of new knowledge, we decided to include staff and students in our ethnography.

Ultimately, the students produced a website in which their body of research and individual stories were published and used as a resource for incoming students. Since these stories were essential texts created by students for other students, there were opportunities for every student, regardless of language proficiency, to have something to contribute. A core component of our PBL design, co-constructed, peer-to-peer interviews allowed the

# Students as Content Creators: A Brooklyn Ethnography

students to share their lived experiences with current and prospective students in very real ways. Some excerpts of their stories are shared here, and are indicative of how a PBL



framework gives students a space in which to consider their own realities, problems, and vulnerabilities, and share them from a position of

strength, advocacy, and agency.

“When students are charged with preserving, capturing and then sharing their experiences in the school

and in the community, teaching and learning becomes dialogic — with students and their curated artifacts providing conversation pieces and inspiration for reflection, much like the best museum installations. (Emdin, 2016, p. 188).”

## Teacher Implementation Guide

The ethnography unit illustrates one way that students can be content creators in the classroom. In this case, while they were developing content, students also negotiated identity and difference not merely to become compliant *learners of other things*, but in order to directly address their marginalization and reposition themselves as *producers of knowledge*. When used at the start of the year (especially the freshman or first year in a new school), such a project has the potential to transform whether and how students engage with new content.

Teachers may be unsure as to how to inspire this kind of learning in their classroom, particularly when its core features suggest a departure from classic planning and lesson implementation. The following section provides some general guidelines or steps that teachers can follow to enact PBL in diverse classrooms.

## No Turning Back

“Back in Panama, every day I’d wake up and wash up and go downstairs where my grandfather waited for me with two dollars for breakfast which was a banana, a roll of bread, a slice of cheese and a pint of orange juice, which was my daily routine. Oh, how I loved those hot sunny days, but that all changed when I was at the age of four, when my dad flew back to Panama from New York to come and get me. At that moment I was hurting. I wanted to be with my parents in New York, but I also wanted to stay with my grandmother. I had no choice though. I belonged by my parents’ side, besides all of this was done for me so that I could have a better future. Now, I’m on the plane, I can hear the pilot speaking, saying “Put on your seatbelts.” At that moment I knew there was no turning back.”



## Selecting a problem

Brainstorming authentic problems with unknown answers: The first step to PBL is to identify a problem. These problems provide the most meaningful learning opportunities when they are student-generated; a teacher can guide students through brainstorming exercises of problems that they notice, or contributions that they can make to better their communities.

Problem selection is key to PBL's success in a number of ways. The central problem must be both compelling to the students, and allow for maximal chances toward positive learning outcomes. Part of the teacher's role is to guide students toward a problem that they can successfully solve; PBL can be very rewarding, but also very disappointing if the solution proves to be unmanageable in terms of the scale or time that it requires. An example of an unmanageable problem might be dismantling an unpopular school uniform policy. If students decide that they want to take on this problem, the teacher may want to do some behind-the-scenes work to determine if modifying the policy is at all possible. If the teacher finds that students will likely not be able to effect any change in this policy, the best course of action is to guide the students toward a different project where they can find more successful outcomes. For many youth, barriers encountered in their regular lives can naturally discourage feelings of empowerment and agency toward

change, and teachers need to take care not to replicate those experiences within school environments as well. Teacher-guided PBL disrupts familiar patterns of frustration that many youth confront, and creates opportunities to effect a desired result.

## Practicing facilitation

One of the challenges for teachers of PBL is to facilitate classroom work rather than to explicitly lead prescribed lessons. Stepping away from the front of the classroom, and allowing students to interact with each other directly without a teacher as intermediary can be new territory for even an experienced teacher. To practice, teachers should be conscious of their critical, but secondary, role in guiding the project. Students need

### One of my Favorite Places: Chinese Bakery



I have lived in Bay Parkway since coming from China for six months. They have my favorite shop under the Bay Parkway train station, a little bakery where they just sell the breakfasts of Chinese snacks. Every day before I go to school, I will buy some dumplings and some spring rolls for breakfast. That is very authentic Chinese snacks, and very, very tasty. In the store are four shop assistants, and all are very nice people, because they accept food coupons, so every time I go there, there are many people in the line. Sometimes I have to wait a long time (which is why sometimes I can't get to school on time, haha!). In summary, this is a very good place, and the bakery is my favorite shop.

# Students as Content Creators: A Brooklyn Ethnography

to be unequivocally at the center of the inquiry. Teachers should monitor their contributions, remove themselves from a central classroom role to the extent possible, minimize teacher-led, whole group lessons, and actively listen.

Asking lots of questions — and resisting the urge to provide answers — should characterize a teacher’s participation.

The work of facilitating involves a lot of invisible and silent, yet supportive work to allow the students to make progress throughout.

## Maintaining high standards

Though PBL is a responsive, student-led curriculum, objectives can still be defined for each of the tasks that students are required to do. In the Ethnography Unit example, students needed to compose an appropriate business letter, develop correctly formulated interview questions, and write narrative essays about themselves and their communities. Some of these tasks were evaluated and rated on grade-appropriate rubrics. These measures helped to monitor students’ linguistic progress, and served to document that school-based standards were maintained. To create a PBL unit, there is no need to sacrifice rigor or student-created content; with the right kind of planning, both can be successfully implemented.

## Disseminating the results

Perhaps the most important part of PBL is the sharing of the student work products toward solving the problem at large. In this case, the students were tasked with creating an ethnography of themselves, and created a website which showcased their work and built connections in their community. The work the students completed was not merely classroom-bound, having little use or meaning beyond the classroom. In fact, the work that the students created and completed was truly relevant and authentic in the real world, and served as a tool for community building within the classroom itself.

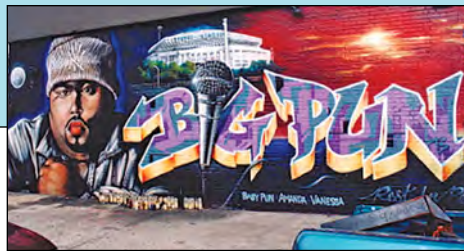
## Keeping Culture Relevant

As a young boy I was out of control. Being born in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, and moving to the South Bronx, I saw some things that I wouldn’t want my children to witness. For example, I’ve seen ridiculous shootouts, crazy fist fights/brawls. I’ve also seen drug dealers making sales right in front of me while I was exiting corner stores with a bacon, egg and cheese sandwich in my hand at the age of five.

Although there may be five different boroughs in New York City, it’s one thing that we all had in common, the way we spoke to each other (our slang). Certain words have different meanings by the way we used it in a sentence. “Mad” was one of the words. The way we use it, it means “a lot of, or over exaggeration.” “We was mad tired after being on the train for 2 hours.” We weren’t angry, we were just very tired.

Today, a nineteen-year-old young man, I can use both positive and negative aspects of my environment such as the gang violence, the drug dealers and the passing of my uncle to build character, which I have already begun.

The mural (above) is in remembrance of Big Pun, located at 163rd and Rogers. He was a Hip Hop legend in the Bronx, where music is a key part of our culture.





## Conclusion

Capitalizing on the diversity and strengths of traditionally marginalized youth can infuse discrete and isolated classroom tasks with new energy and creativity. Ultimately, the products that the students created here could have been entirely teacher-directed, but the learning that took place through negotiation and critical problem-solving was likely much more valuable than the concrete tasks alone. Through their implementation, the core PBL tasks encouraged students to know each other as work partners, and helped them to build community and classroom culture at the start of a school year. Newcomers to the school had an important, active role in this classroom from their first day of attendance and were incorporated into the community as respected members with experiences and assets. These assets were front and center as students created their own content, on their own levels, approaching the work as expert researchers and authors.

But this approach went beyond using students' cultures as mere assets in the service of academic learning; the classroom centered culture and identity as fundamentally valid topics of study, to be valued and sustained throughout the continuum of living, learning and problem solving in and beyond the classroom.

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# Building Culturally Responsive Learning Communities through Political and Civic Engagement

## SUMMARY

The Angelo Del Toro Puerto Rican/Hispanic Youth Leadership Institute (PR/HYLI) experience integrates Latinx students into a community of learners by providing culturally responsive learning experiences that culminate in civic engagement. This integrative process affirms students' life experiences, linguistic diversity, and their cultures — who they are.

### *Imagine 200 Latinx high school students*

taking on the roles of New York State Assembly members and debating live bills in the Assembly Chamber. Also, imagine those same students — many of them English language learners — taking on the roles of governor, Assembly speaker, Senate majority leader, Senate minority leader and Sergeant at Arms. Finally, envision members of the NYS Assembly as guests to the one-day Mock Assembly totally run by Latinx high school students from schools across New York State.

The Angelo Del Toro Puerto Rican/Hispanic Youth Leadership Institute is just this — a program that prepares Latinx students from across New York to become actors in the NYS Assembly, for a day, where they debate and pass live bills. The program incorporates culturally responsive pedagogies to ensure that students' linguistic and cultural identities are given their rightful attention during the training sessions. To prepare for this Institute, more than 300 high school students from across the state participate in a minimum of 30 hours of training that includes: understanding how NYS government works, learning about how a bill becomes a law,

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**Theresa Longhi is a NYSUT member and an ESL/ENL teacher in her 20th year at Ichabod Crane Central School District in upstate New York. She holds a bachelor's in psychology and master's degrees in TESOL and literacy, all from the University at Albany. She has taught ENL K-12 but has a special fondness for working with 9-12th graders. Longhi places great emphasis on incorporating story into her classroom, where she establishes and maintains strong family/school connections and networks.**

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**Theresa Longhi, Ichabod Crane Teachers Association**  
**José M. Meléndez, Hudson Valley Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network**

doing research and debate of bills selected for the Institute, learning how to advocate for causes affecting the Latinx community, and delving into specific bills that affect the Latinx community.

### **Concept of Culture**

There is widespread consensus that the culture of any social group consists of visible and invisible traits. Artifacts, behaviors, diet, and customs would be considered some of the visible dimensions of a culture. In contrast, deeply held values, beliefs, and attitudes would be examples of its invisible domain (Hall, 1976). Hall likens culture to an iceberg, with the invisible aspects being akin to the submerged portion of the iceberg. The strength of this image is that it brings attention to the vast invisible elements of culture and avoids reducing peoples' heritages to *facts, faces and fiestas*.

One possible limitation of the iceberg analogy is its depiction of culture as a static entity. Culture is not only the particular way we act and create in specific social contexts, but also how we live and experience these activities (Williams, 1961). As such, culture is a dynamically lived experience that

changes and evolves over time. More importantly, it is the substance of individual and collective identity (Cummins & Taylor, 2011).

Here, we adopt the view of culture, particularly students' and teachers' cultures, as dynamically lived experience. At the same time, we acknowledge both its visible and invisible dimensions. This stance permits approaching students from different cultures as multifaceted individuals, who come into our schools and classrooms with a rich and complex array of experiences. This helps us to affirm who they are and to facilitate a healthy integration to their new culture as they develop their academic identities.

### **Culture Encounters and Acculturation**

New York State P-12 systems continue to become more linguistically and culturally diverse. This diversity in P-12 systems requires a serious consideration of acculturation processes and changes in our teaching approaches. We take acculturation to be the changes in personal and social identity that happen when culturally diverse peoples and groups come in contact (Berry, 1997). Individuals experience

New York State P-12 systems continue to become more linguistically and culturally diverse. This diversity in P-12 systems requires a serious consideration of acculturation processes and changes in our teaching approaches.

Stories, games and group work activities are excellent ways to bridge the cultural divide between home and the classroom and school communities.

two types of changes when exposed to another culture: overt and deep (Berry, 1997). At the surface level, acculturation may entail changes in behavior, eating habits, clothing styles and new speech patterns, or even a new language, among others. At a deeper level, there are transformations in the sense of self-identity, accompanied by a great deal of acculturative stress. This tension can manifest itself in the form of strong emotional output, including anxiety and depression.

Berry identified four possible outcomes to the identity formation process of acculturation for newcomers and other minorities. (1) They can assimilate and abandon their native culture. (2) They can reject the new culture, cling to their past and remain separated. (3) In extreme cases they reject both their heritage culture and the new culture, remaining marginalized. For example, they can join a sub-cultural group (e.g. a gang). Or (4), they can integrate into the receiving culture, while maintaining their heritage (integrative acculturation).

Acculturation and its possible outcomes take place on two levels: the societal and the academic (Douglas-Brown, 2014). We have little control of what happens in the larger social context (Berry, 1997; Douglas-Brown, 2014). However, we have a great deal of control and influence over our

schools and classrooms and their learning community dynamics. We can facilitate students' mutual engagement in academic work, joint enterprise and access to a shared repertoire of resources and practices (Douglas-Brown, 2014; Wenger, 1998). To do this in a way that helps diverse students engage academically, we also affirm and validate who they are and enable them to invest their identities in learning. In this way, our classrooms can become mediating spaces for diverse students' integrative acculturation and their development of academic identities (Cummins & Taylor, 2011).

As we foster these academic communities in our schools and classrooms, we adopt a culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy that is more than just tying lessons to facts, faces and fiestas. It is also important to take advantage of how students learn at home and in their communities, that is, their *cultural learning styles*. These are the ways that families, including mothers, fathers, grandparents and other community members, teach life skills and foundational knowledge to children in different cultural groups (Hammond, 2014). Hammond has suggested that, in order to make curricula, lessons and learning culturally responsive, it helps to “storify,” “gamify,” and make learning social. If we make space for these learning modalities in our teaching and

curricula, we cast a wide cross-cultural net. This is due to the fact that these are common cultural patterns and traditions that cut across ethnic and social groups: African-American, Latinx, Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islanders, and many working-class communities, among others (Hammond, 2014). These groups engage in key tasks collectively (agriculture, child rearing, and physical labor). They learn socially, and therefore stories, games and group work are excellent ways to bridge the cultural divide between home and the classroom and school communities.

In addition to collaboration, games and narrative, there is another important dimension that teachers may want to consider. It entails connecting classroom learning to issues and experiences that are personally and collectively relevant to students, their communities and society: the social action dimension. This dimension has been described in the related literature as the highest level of culturally relevant and inclusive pedagogy (Banks, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012). In the following section we present a detailed account of how the Angelo Del Toro Puerto Rican/Hispanic Youth Leadership Institute (from here on referred to as the Institute) actualizes the tenets of culturally responsive and relevant education discussed so far.

### **The Angelo Del Toro Puerto Rican/Hispanic Youth Leadership Institute Experience**

The Institute experience incorporates all of the elements of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, especially the social action dimension. The goals of the Institute's program are to develop students' leadership skills; promote their civic engagement; generate opportunities for students to interact with positive adult role models; create partnerships and conversations among educators, business leaders, and students; and foster students' understanding of the NYS legislative process. The program operates in three distinct phases:

Phase I: Training in Regional Delegations

Phase II: Hispanic Youth Leadership Institute in Albany

Phase III: Hispanic Youth Leadership Institute Follow-Up.

### **Phase I Training Modules**

- Team-building
- Leadership
- PR/HYLI History
- Communication and Public Speaking
- How a Bill Becomes Law
- Parliamentary Procedures
- Analysis and Study of Bills
- Culture
- Advocacy and Community Issues
- Scholarship Essay Writing
- Debating – Party Affiliations
- Specialty Roles and Practice Sessions
- Decorum for the Institute

Each phase is aligned with the New York State Social Studies Framework, the Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards, and is designed to prepare students to be college and career ready.

The Institute recruitment process is open to all interested Hispanic juniors and seniors from high schools across NYS. The regional application includes an essay on a topic of high cultural relevance, which students can write in Spanish or English. Past essay topics have included art as a tool for

social and political change and the role of key Hispanic leaders in the advancement of the Latino community.

Regional Delegation Trainer/Leaders review applications and select participants, based on the content and quality of students' essay responses, letters of recommendation from mentors, educators, and counselors, and a high school transcript.

Students' applications are considered holistically to benefit students who are highly motivated, produce application essays of high quality, or are highly recommended. This flexibility in the selection process is especially beneficial to English language learners. This is another way the Institute acknowledges and values students' prior knowledge, experience, language and learning.

## **Phase I: Training in Regional Delegations**

Phase I consists of a minimum of 30 hours of regional training delivered by approximately 25 New York State certified teachers across the state.

Training modules — available online at [www.prhyli.org](http://www.prhyli.org) — offer educators activities and resources to incorporate these topics into the trainings carried out statewide in preparation for the Institute. Furthermore, the training modules present activities that offer students culturally relevant experiences that can be incorporated into classroom practices.

## **Figure 1**

### **Module 5 — How a Bill Becomes a Law**

The module How a Bill Becomes a Law provides students an opportunity to understand the different responsibilities of Federal and State Government and how an idea becomes a bill and ultimately a law.

#### **Learning Vignette**

Introduce students to the lawmaking process by asking students to think about things that bother them, things that they feel there should be a law against. Give students time to think in silence (30 seconds or more time depending on your students) and ask that they raise their hands once they have an idea or thought for sharing. Using popcorn style brainstorming, solicit their thoughts, asking: Why is there a need for a law on that? Do not offer judgement; just seek clarification. After everyone who is willing to share has done so, ask the group if anyone is aware that many laws come to be because a person (just like them) felt like they do at the moment. This activity can be followed by deeper exploration of how a bill becomes a law. Ask students how an idea/thought can make it all the way to becoming a law. Pause for sharing. Distribute reading material on how a bill becomes a law and after students have enough time to read the material ask that they turn to a partner and share what they have learned.

For example, instead of lecturing students on how a bill becomes a law, the manual offers suggested activities to engage students in collaborative teams that research, prepare and present this topic to their peers (see Figures 1 and 2).

The activities align with the NYS Next Generation English Language Arts Standards emphasis on academic literacy across the curriculum. They provide students opportunities to work individually, as pairs and collaboratively, thus exposing them to different learning modalities. The bills selected for the program address issues that impact the Latino community, making them relevant to this student population. In the past, legislative bills and advocacy issues have focused on bilingual education, police brutality, immigrant rights, equal pay, college access for undocumented students, and home language translation rights of parents, among many others.

In small collaborative groups students engage in research to identify evidence to support their claims, for and against the bills, forcing them to examine research that presents different perspectives on the issues at hand which impact the Latino community. Participants also engage extensively in role play and debate in small and whole group formats, honing their dialogue and discussion skills. Students develop

a sense of responsibility toward the Latino community and give voice to the voiceless as they participate in the program. In some cases, students report that their political ambitions are further developed through their participation in the program.

When asked about their favorite part of the sessions and how they were going to use what they learned, student responses underscored how the program allowed them to build their literate selves and acculturate into the academic and civic realms. One

**Figure 2**

### **Module 7 — Analysis and Study of Bills**

This module allows students to delve deeply into the chosen bills and understand the diverse views that surround each bill. This module also allows students to research a bill and consider its purpose, implications, consequences, accuracy, relevance, and fairness, thus developing their critical thinking skills. Students prepare to debate bills using claims that are supported by evidence backed by research.

#### **Learning Vignette**

Provide students with the text of selected bills, divide students in groups of 5 or 6 students, and assign each group a bill. Please note that bills selected are meaningful to the Latino community given that they deal with issues impacting the Latino community. For example, a bill that allows undocumented students to receive state funding to support their college tuition. Have students do a close reading of the bill text, research articles looking for arguments for and against the bill and evaluate each argument based on the claims, reasoning, and evidence presented. Teams will research additional articles to clarify or corroborate conflicting information. Team members will investigate the issues in depth and prepare their arguments for debate. Students will then debate the bills roleplaying a mock assembly following parliamentary procedure.

This culturally relevant practice facilitates students' acculturative integration into the academic life and American culture while honoring their heritage and interests.

student commented, "I want to do everything I can to create a better future for minorities and the generations to come." Another said, "Coming into this, I never questioned how laws or bills were made or passed. Now that I understand this, I will have more ideas on ways I can improve my community."

The training sessions also create a space for students' home language. Groups and individual students work on bills, advocacy and community issues, projects and cultural productions in their preferred languages. The Institute provides bilingual versions of the bills and analysis instruments, while providing participants with the option to write and respond in Spanish and English. Students can also present their arguments during debate in the language of their choice. This culturally relevant practice facilitates students' acculturative integration into the academic life and American culture while honoring their heritage and interests.

The Institute training module activities also acculturate participants to mainstream academic demands. For example, during the regional training phase, participants engage in individual research and study of bills at home. They also review their homework individually during training sessions prior to the group work on bills. In addition, students work individually on an essay writing project focused on an annual Institute theme. Seniors have the

opportunity to submit their essays for the annual scholarship contest. The scholarship is a strong motivation for personal individual success and recognition. At the same time, the essay provides a space for students' voices and identities.

## **Phase II: Hispanic Youth Leadership Institute in Albany**

In any given year, up to 400 students across the state participate in the regional Institute training Phase I. Due to space and budgetary constraints, the Institute grant provides for 200 students to be selected for the March weekend Institute in Albany each year. The selection process developed with delegation leaders/trainers is very rigorous.

### **Saturday**

Saturday activities begin with a series of opening remarks by keynote speakers. These speakers are selected for the power of their life story to inspire students and the cultural and social relevance of their work, example and message. Keynote speakers have included labor leader Dolores Huerta, singer and activist Taína Asili, Rhodes Scholar and author Wes Moore and Marvel Comics writer Edgardo Miranda Rodríguez, among others. The core of the day's activities and workshops focuses on building a cohesive team – one Institute. Activities throughout the day focus on a central theme each year. Themes have



included the role of the arts in advancing Latino aspirations, non-violent political leadership, and advocacy. Activities, team building sessions, creative and artistic hands-on projects and student-developed presentations also reflect students' cultural experiences and are based on issues relevant to them and the Latino/Hispanic community.

### **Sunday**

The main activity on Sunday is the mock Assembly session, held in the New York State Assembly chambers. This is the culmination of all the preparatory work of Phase I. Debate activities in the mock assembly are also collaborative in nature, as students take on the role of Assembly members and their counsels. Debaters present arguments for and against each bill, depending on the stance of the Assembly member each represents. Arguments during the debates are text-based and support the appropriate NYS learning standards. Sunday activities culminate with a student delegate recognition dinner. During this event, seniors who submit winning essays are awarded scholarships. All delegates have an opportunity to network, dine and socialize with public officials and business leaders in a formal setting.

### **Monday**

Students participate in workshops that address the theme of the Institute and or areas of interest to Latinx youth.

After the workshops, students visit their respective legislators to discuss issues that affect the Hispanic/Latinx community in their schools, local communities and across New York State. Additionally, they may discuss with legislators bills that were debated during the mock assembly or other legislative initiatives.

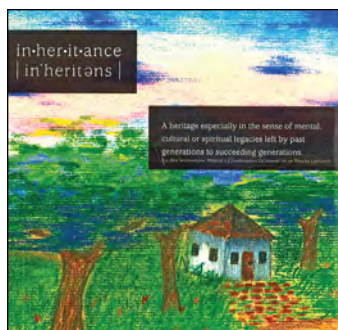
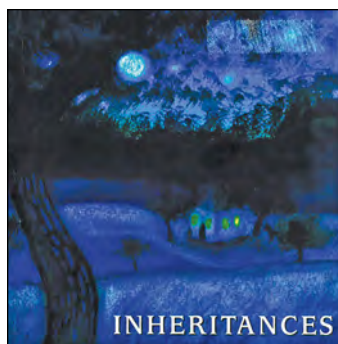
### **Phase III: Hispanic Youth**

#### **Leadership Institute Follow-Up**

Student delegates participate in a follow up activity upon completion of the Institute. Some delegations offer their region's students a reunion/evaluation session where they come together with their parents and alumni to reflect on the entire Institute experience and how it has impacted them. Local legislators are also invited to the event. Many local delegates continue to develop their leadership skills when they return the following year as volunteers to share their experience.

*Student mock assembly*





*Legacies, a student anthology published by Institute participants in collaboration with the ELL community.*

## **Beyond The Institute: The Classroom and Institute Connection**

There is a strong connection between the Institute and the classroom. It promotes integrative acculturation and definitely has an impact on school culture. My students sometimes call me Ms. L, or Maestra. These experiences exemplify how classrooms and schools can connect with the Institute to extend its work and prepare students for participation in it. With an 11 year history of participation, I see that recruitment and retention are the strongest motivators for Central High School (CHS) Latinx students. Middle school students know that the Institute is a critical part of their high school experience. The younger generation has watched their siblings and cousins return from the Institute changed in ways they cannot quite name. The younger students know and understand that their time will come to participate in this life-changing experience. When I ask my students what the Institute has given them, no one is quick to answer. There is always a long and very thoughtful pause. The words “connection,” “empowerment,” “hope” and “strength” are often mentioned.

## **Academics and the Institute at CHS**

Students at CHS established what they call Institute PREP, after-school sessions that Institute participants initiated three years ago spearheaded by Ana

Cruz, an Institute alumnus. During Institute PREP, students organize into teams after school and research the bills, prepare their presentations and practice their debates. My role is to be a facilitator and a resource. Institute PREP occurs at least once a week throughout Phase I trainings and increases in frequency and duration as the weekend Institute approaches.

Reading is a key foundation for ELLs and Institute participants. Everyone is expected to read at length across a wide range of texts. I use metacognitive strategies to ensure that students are monitoring their comprehension and engagement with the text.

Students are graded on responses to text, identification of unknown vocabulary, self to text and self to world connections, and summary and synthesis. My goal is to help students become critical readers and thinkers of the information placed before them. “The experience of navigating tough text on tough issues as a team builds community . . .” it empowers and helps inform their decisions. By the time the ELA Regents or the Institute bill analysis roll around, students know they can navigate any text. No topic is closed to them.

Another way the Institute intersects with CHS students’ development of literate and academic selves is through *Legacies*. This is a student anthology that was begun in 2007 as a collaborative effort between the Illustration class

at the high school and the ELL community. Through student narratives and illustrations, ELL students' lives and stories, including those of Institute participants, are depicted with sensitivity and great care by their peers. Students meet at least twice with their illustrator, mostly native speakers, to discuss their vision for their story. To CHS illustrators' credit, they have responded with great empathy, compassion and professionalism. When students finish reading the book, we gather as a group and vote on the cover. Once the books are printed, there is a book-signing event to which teachers, staff and parents are invited. The book is also available for viewing during Senior Recognition Night. A powerful element of *Legacies* is that authors take their books home and read them to their siblings and parents. This act affirms and validates families shared experiences and histories.

Of special note is the story by Maria Cruz, an Institute alumnus. The theme was "Ten years from now..." Maria wrote about the Institute and how she planned to give back. Her illustrator conferenced with Maria and asked her about Institute. Maria explained what the Institute was and what she had gained from it. Her illustrator crafted a beautiful drawing with Maria standing on stage in front of a large audience with a colorful banner overhead that read: The Angelo Del Toro Puerto Rican/Hispanic Youth Leadership. The impact that the Institute had on Maria, especially as it relates to her civic

and social engagement, cannot be minimized. She returned to CHS after the Institute ready to make her mark and use her voice. When given the opportunity to march for immigrant rights, she joined a local march and came armed with a poster that quoted her favorite artist, Fridha Kahlo. "Pies, para que los quiero, si tengo alas para volar?" (*Feet, what need have I of you, if I have wings to fly?*) When I pointed out that the march was not school sponsored, and she was under no obligation to attend, Maria leveled her gaze at her teacher and said "I will be there Ms. L. I know it's not for school, but I NEED to be there. Those who can do something, must do something!" Before the Institute, Maria was a shy and reserved student who would not have participated in a political march. She did not, in her words, see how "politics related to me, or to my family."

### **The Institute and the Social Action Dimension at CHS**

SALA Latina and the Alumni Panel are two further examples of the impact of the Institute in participants' school life, specifically in the domain of social action and engagement. The Alumni Panel occurs in November and is attended by CHS alumni who return to talk with underclassmen about their experience in college and beyond. With the exception of one participant, the last three panels have been composed entirely of Institute alumni.

SALA Latina/International Student Organization was founded by an Institute alumnus and is the first Latinx/International club in CHS history. The club is open to all students at CHS who wish to learn more about and celebrate Latino and other world cultures. When students return from the Institute the question often asked is “What are we going to do to bring the Institute in house?” Four years ago, Julie had an immediate response. She began collecting signatures and crafting a mission statement. She coordinated speakers and recruited students for monthly meetings. She met with administration to introduce her idea and rationale. She was tenacious, motivated and inspired. Her passion for her culture and her desire to have a legacy that honored that culture was contagious and inspiring. Over the last three years, SALA Latina/I.S.O. has instituted a scholarship for college-bound ELL’s. The application and criteria were crafted by former SALA President and PR/HYLI alumnus Carmen Cruz. SALA has sponsored a Mariachi Night at the Community Theatre, held raffles for Hurricane and Earthquake Relief for Mexico and Puerto Rico, traveled to New York City, and distributed Valentine’s Day cards to every staff member and student at Central High School (650 students and staff). SALA/I.S.O. engages in social service and engaged action. Many of our prior and present members are Institute alumni or

participants. This past July, two members of SALA, Julian Rivera and Elisa Lopez (former Institute alumni) painted the flags of each international student, both past and present, on the ceiling tiles of their ENL classroom. Elisa wanted a quote to sum up her feelings about her place at CHS. After searching for the perfect quote, I asked her what she wanted to say, in her own words. Elisa replied, “Everyone is welcome here regardless of skin color, ethnicity, gender, nationality or religion. We are all the same. We are all family.” She painted a large globe of the world on the central tile, then wrote her quote on each side of the globe. She surrounded the center tile with 18 hand-painted tiles from around the world. She then painted an additional 27 miniature flags on the center tile, flanked by the name SALA/I.S.O.

### **Program Outcomes and Evaluation**

Each year an outside independent evaluator assesses the Institute program using both qualitative and quantitative data from various sources to provide a comprehensive description of the implementation of the program, participant perceptions and program outcomes. Among the data-gathering tools used are student, trainer and chaperone surveys, direct observation, and interviews. All three phases of the program are evaluated annually.

The outside independent evaluator ascertains whether the following are achieved:

1. Meeting the established participation target of 200 students.
2. Attendance and participation levels of students at local trainings.
3. The effectiveness of the three phases of the program.
4. The quality of the performance during the Mock Assembly, other Institute events and any work produced by students.
5. The participants' perceptions regarding the goals of the Angelo Del Toro Institute program.

### Phase I: 2017 Evaluation Summary

During the 2017 year, more than 90 percent of participating students indicated that they “learned a lot” about what makes a good leader during their delegation’s regional trainings. The vast majority of students also felt they learned a lot about how to develop an argument for or against a bill, how a bill becomes a law, and the role of a New York State assembly member. When students were asked to provide an overall rating of their delegation’s regional trainings on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), 94 percent of the students gave the trainings either a “4” or “5.”

Our trainers and chaperones reported on student learning:



*“They learned that they have a voice and that there are many opportunities for them to express such a voice. That even one person can produce change.”*

*“The program provided students with the skills and confidence to speak up more for what they believe in and to be proud of their heritage.”*

*“They learned how to cooperate on a grand scale, the basics of the legislative process, and the importance of being an advocate for a particular viewpoint.”*

Students’ comments further illustrated their satisfaction with the regional trainings. In particular, students discussed how much they enjoyed building and debating arguments. Students also enjoyed networking and meeting new people and learning about bills and the legislative process. Students reported that the regional trainings helped them improve their public

**Cultural activity at SUNY Albany.**

speaking skills, gave them more confidence to advocate for their beliefs, and prepared them to participate in the mock assembly when they arrived in Albany. When asked how the trainings could be improved, several students suggested more team-building activities, more opportunities for student-to-student interaction, and more time practicing for the mock assembly. Here are a few student quotes about their experience with the program:

*“I will take what I learned to promote activism within the Latino community and raise awareness of ways to get involved in our local governments.”*

*“I might change my career choice now because I learned that my community needs a voice and I wish to provide that.”*

*“I am going to advocate for the voiceless.”*

*“This experience helped me find my voice and gain confidence in what I have to say.”*

## **Phase II: Evaluation Summary**

During 2017, students and adults felt that the events of the weekend Institute were successful in meeting the short-term outcomes of the Institute. More than 90 percent of students and adults agreed that the Institute helped students better understand the legislative process, helped them develop or enhance their abilities, such as their

communication skills, and provided them with connections that will help them achieve their college and career goals. For more details on program outcomes, visit [www.prhyla.org](http://www.prhyla.org).

## **Phase III: Evaluation Summary**

Following each year’s Institute in Albany, delegations hold a variety of post-Institute activities that can range from a formal reunion where students share their reflections to developing social media forums for students to stay connected. The delegation leaders also participate in a statewide debriefing session and are expected to continue to work to provide opportunities for students to further develop leadership potential.

Student reunion events are typically held a month or two following the Institute event in Albany. All Institute student participants are invited to attend and to celebrate their hard work and accomplishments and to share their experiences. Delegations also invite parents, school staff and chaperones. The events are led by the delegation leaders and may include visits from local members of the New York State Assembly.

The following reflection by a delegate summarizes Phase III: “The Institute is an amazing program and something I wouldn’t pass up if I had the opportunity to do it all over again. It immerses you in your culture and helps you advocate for your rights.” Parents who attend

have also indicated how they have seen their children change. At one event a parent indicated that she never thought she would have conversations about politics with her teenage daughter.

## Conclusion

The above accounts about the Institute and its place in our school community illustrate how diverse students can integrate into their new culture through learning communities that mediate their growth as academic and literate selves and validate and affirm their heritage. There is no better way to express the integrative power of the Institute experience. Students who have participated in the Institute program stay connected — the students continue to be part of a network long after the program ends. One may say that long-term relationships and friendships often happen among students in high school, however, the transformative impact of this program goes beyond any general experience from high school. One will find many volunteers, teachers and chaperones in the program each year who are former Institute alumni. The students who go through this program develop a long-term commitment to the Latinx community and stay connected and involved with the program.

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# Closing the Opportunity Gap through a Culture of Care

## SUMMARY

Through the development of culturally responsive curricula, professional learning, and aligned instruction, faculty and administration at Schenectady High School are working together to cultivate a positive school climate and address systems inside the classroom and the school building that previously led to disproportionate educational outcomes for students of color.

*In the fall of 2011, two 19-year-olds*

were arrested for visiting their former teacher on the first day of school. The students were moving out of the area and felt obligated to thank their teacher for her encouragement and guidance. Tears and personal email addresses were exchanged before the morning bell rang. Then, their former teacher sent them out of the nearest doors. Minutes later, through her classroom window, she witnessed her “babies” get arrested for trespassing. The principal chose to press these charges. This administrator is a black man.

The walls which enclose high school students are much different than any other buildings in New York State. They are not only made of bricks and concrete, but of traditional and well-established systems. In the fall of 2012, Schenectady High School regulated students as many high schools do currently: students were given rules and in turn were expected to adapt to those rules or face harsh consequences. The system seems, at a glance, as concrete as the walls in the two ISS (In School Suspension) rooms. These disciplinary structures placed on our students were based upon top-down communication. Students were told what to do and if compliance did not occur,

*Philip Weinman is a National Board Certified Teacher and currently serves as the engagement supervisor and night school principal at Schenectady High School. Weinman has led the building in developing respite programs and restorative practices that support students' social emotional needs and help teachers to build positive relationships. He is a leading member of the district's Trauma Sensitive Schools core team. Weinman has been nominated for the Schenectady district teacher of the year, the YMCA outstanding educator award, the 2019 Schenectady County Human Rights award and received his school district leadership certification at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts.*

*Colleen Wygal, a member of the Schenectady Federation of Teachers, has taught English in the district since January 2002. Wygal played an integral role in developing student voice by creating a student-run club, Voices of Schenectady. She has been a support of student restorative programming and has taken the initiative to research and write curricula for high-interest courses such as Hip Hop as Literature and Slang to Profane. She has been selected as a teacher of influence by the Scholars of Recognition seven times. She is an International Baccalaureate Instructor of Literature as well as an instructor at CREATE Community Studios. Her vision is to encourage growth for students and staff within her school by bridging the gap between peers as well as adults through expressive creation.*



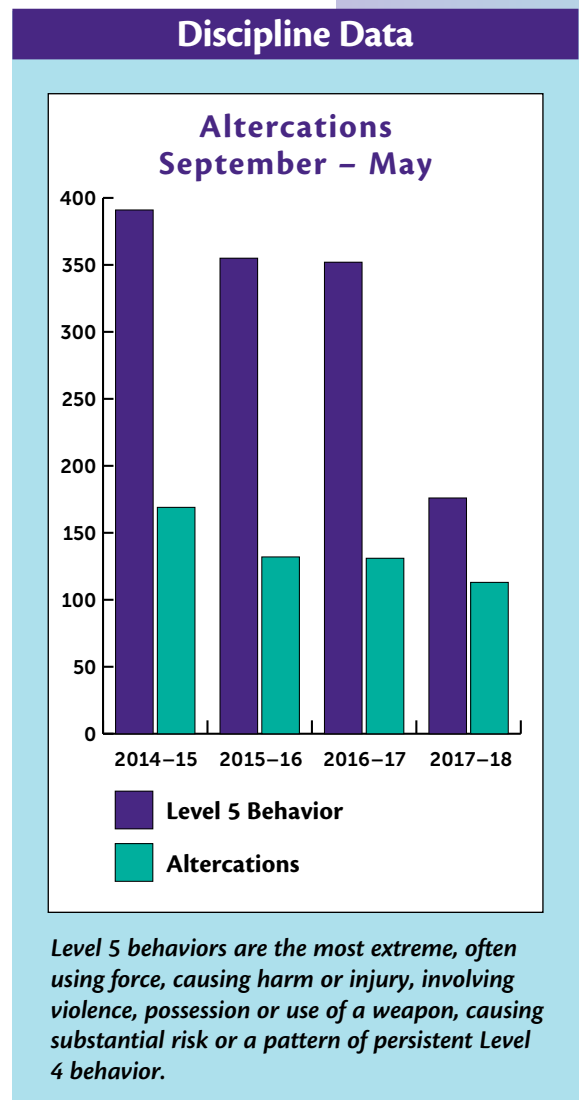
**Philip Weinman, Schenectady City School District  
Colleen Wygal, Schenectady Federation of Teachers**

students were removed from school. An exclusion crisis drastically impacted our students of color at a suspension rate of five to one. Many students of color were not being heard; consequently, they were not being educated.

These instances are not unique to Schenectady High School; the chronic opportunity gap for students of color in schools across the United States has created an epidemic of dependent learners who do not feel welcomed at school. “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, p.529).” This type of exclusion may be 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 disconnected school policies and teacher instructional decisions that over time result in students of color not receiving adequate instruction, while disproportionately removing our

students of color from the academic environment. Martin Haberman calls the practices of standing lectures and rote memorization the “pedagogy of poverty” that set students up for obtaining outdated knowledge and skills (Haberman, 1991).

Our school, like many throughout the United States, has had an existence of disproportionality across educational outcomes. Students of color are excluded from the classroom three times more often than their white counterparts, are six times more likely to go to a Superintendent Hearing, and they are 20 percent more



*Source: Schenectady High School*

## Demographics

With a population close to 10,000 students, the Schenectady City School District is one of the largest school districts in the Capital Region of New York.

More than 70 percent of SCSD students are eligible for free or reduced lunch and 84 percent of students are economically disadvantaged, making Schenectady ranked 13th in the nation for highest childhood poverty rates among cities over 65,000 in population.

The Government Law Center reported that Schenectady County had the highest rate of index crimes in New York State, 50 percent higher than the index crimes reported in New York City (Liebman, 2016).

### Student body

- 38 percent of SCSD students are Black or African American
- 19 percent Hispanic
- 17 percent Asian or native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
- 24 percent White
- 2 percent Multiracial

Eighteen percent of student are identified as students with disabilities. In addition, a large percentage of students have experienced one or more adverse childhood experiences. The district is composed of 11 elementary schools, three middle schools, one high school and an adult education center.

likely to drop out. Over time, many students of color are pushed out of school. Overall students of color have had lower attendance, achievement and graduation rates at Schenectady High School.

“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 the world (Freire, 1970, p.58).” Paulo Freire spoke of these systems decades ago, but that does not mean it is too late for our school to implement his ideas.



### Circle UP!

In 2019, the staff of Schenectady High School began working to internalize the mission that “Race, Economics, and Disability will no longer serve as predictors of student achievement.” Current and former students’ voices are at the center of this work. The realization has not occurred overnight, but rather taken years of work developing equitable educational systems that support student voice, accountability and teacher collaboration around culturally responsive instruction. One process adopted by the high school is called Circle UP! This restorative practice

places all members of a community (classroom, club, group) in a circle. The “Circle Keeper” asks meaningful questions and then passes a talking piece around when someone wishes to speak. The talking piece provides a forum to truly hear one another as no one speaks until the talking piece is passed to them. It allows the members of the circle to sit with each question and answer (if they choose) from their heart.

To bridge the equity gap, circles are used to give all students an equal opportunity to participate and an opportunity to voice their opinions. This too, builds community as space is given to all to share and students who have not previously spoken find the courage to contribute in this environment. Tom Cavanagh supports these findings in his 2009 study where he found that relationships were the primary reason students attended and strived to do well in school. Cavanagh (2009) states

*“Where positive peer relationships were present, students felt safer to contribute, take risks with their learning, and learn from each other . . . group dynamics of the classroom make a difference to student motivation and attitudes toward learning (p. 62–85).”*

Many studies have clearly linked positive student-teacher relationships to academic achievement. Hattie’s (2012) analysis of the effect of positive student-teacher relationships on learning revealed impressive



**Circle UP! Day  
at Schenectady  
High School**

outcomes equivalent to nearly two years of growth (Smith, Frey, Pumpian, & Fisher, 2017). Equitable schools are diverse ones, and they value their students’ differences and unique experiences with the world, so once a month students and staff get together to discuss topics that seem to really hit home, but may be taboo in a traditional classroom setting. In the last two years, there have been more than 550 circle discussions. When our staff and students meet, it is now in the form of a circle, where the sense of community is the strongest. Race, relationships, school culture, sexual assault, self-care and music are a few conversations that have emerged this year.

*“School circles are organized, well-constructed conversations that are used to unite the school. Personally, I think that circles are healthy for our school. Circles often provide a safe haven for self-expression and opinion. The circle brings me a*

# Closing the Opportunity Gap through a Culture of Care

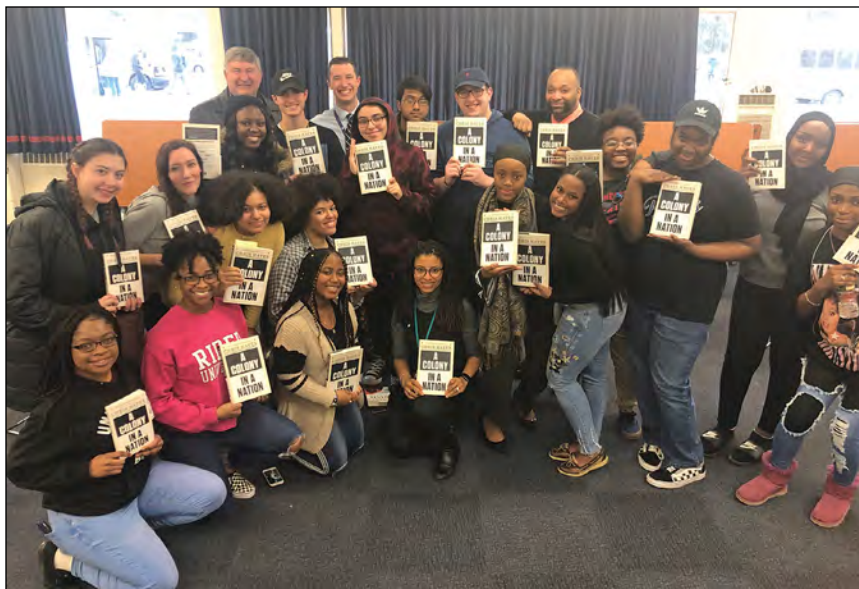
Culturally responsive teaching is one of our most powerful tools for helping students find their way out of the gap.

*new type of respect for Schenectady High and the beauty of our diversity. Each circle brings new light to our community, making our school feel safer. Our school circles allow us to have the difficult conversation and bring our voices to the forefront of change.” — Mya Gore, Schenectady High School student*

## The Formation of the Culturally Responsive Committee

Some of Schenectady High School’s teachers and staff are actively disrupting the status quo. This committee has worked to reconnect dependent learners through authentic engagement, offering professional learning to all staff on the fundamentals of *actively* fighting against systemic racism and biases through weekly “Social Activism Fridays,” sharing important definitions and articles. This group

*Teen TAC-D book study on A Colony in a Nation*



also works in conjunction with Teen Tac D, a student advocacy group that has been established to disrupt disproportion outcomes for students of color. The group has emerged as a leading voice for change in the school community. This year Teen Tac-D has presented to the Schenectady City School Board around the impact of clubs and activities; facilitated three Circle UP! Days, collaborated with a neighboring suburban district, Niskayuna High School, to break down misconceptions; hosted *New York Times* best-selling author Nic Stone for more than 500 students and presented their work at New York University. In conjunction with researchers at NYU the student group has met with building and district stakeholders to put an end to the exclusion crisis and improve the overall culture of the school community. That change agent has been student voice organizing systems that support culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT), as defined by Zaretta Hammond, 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 educators’ 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 (Hammond, 2015, p.15).”

Our staff has had the opportunity to participate in more than 30 sessions throughout the past two years on CRT. These sessions not only allow our staff to learn about the research, but learn from our own staff to better apply the work to our students. A culturally responsive classroom does not center knowledge around facts, rather the perception of information through varying perspectives. This allows for empathy and inclusion for all involved. So everyone got involved and looked at what the biggest perceived problem was in the building: The hallways.

Rather than place all of the blame on student empathy, the administration, guidance department and teachers took an unbiased look at the number of students in the hallway seemingly skipping class. They concluded that more than half of the students were not maliciously missing class, but were mostly truant from study hall. The other students missing class responded that they were disengaged for one reason or another. To address this issue for the following year, educators did not work from a place of tradition, but rather of innovation. In January of 2019, they



*Student mural of Malala at Schenectady High School*

put out a call for elective course proposals with student engagement as the focus. Many teachers took on this opportunity resulting in the addition of eight new courses for the 2019–20 school year, ranging from a history class titled “Mass Media,” to “African American Literature,” to “Voices of Schenectady,” a year-long course with a deliberate goal to create an authentic online cultural representation of the eclectic perspectives and “voices” within our school. A new social studies course, “#activism,” will explore the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements and the intersections of modern activism and social media.

In the sciences, courses will be using a “makerspace” lab, which has a 3-D printer and laser cutter. A new math class, “Statistics in Sports,” will explore how statistics and probabilities are used in sports analysis (Matson, 2019).

The new courses reach across various

## Closing the Opportunity Gap through a Culture of Care

Administration and teachers are using student voice to close the opportunity gap. By offering courses that connect to students' intrinsic interest, students will experience a higher level of connection to classes and the school community.

subject areas, serving as a connection to innovative curriculum design and rigorous coursework. When speaking with students about the new offerings, one replied “finally they listened to us!” Administration and teachers are using student voice to close the opportunity gap. By offering courses that connect to students' intrinsic interest, students will experience a higher level of connection to classes and the school community. Students at Schenectady High school have also helped transform the work that teachers do together. Through lesson reflection and feedback, teachers hear students' opinions in a non-judgmental way. Through circles and conferencing groups we collaborate to solve classroom issues.

A change in teacher professional learning communities (PLC) is already occurring in the social studies department. This year, the American History professional learning community, made up of seven teachers (including four NBCTs) has transformed the traditional work of planning and grading to focus on culturally responsive lesson studies guided by the National Boards five core propositions (see appendix). A lesson study is a well-established form of teacher collaborative inquiry in Japan, which also gained popularity in the United States after publication of results from the 1995 Third International Mathematics

and Science Study (TIMSS). The central feature of lesson study is the observation and analysis of live classroom lessons collaboratively planned by a group of teachers. Chris Ognibene, NBCT, History Department chair, helped organize this year's lesson studies. In reflection, Ognibene stated that “The group ‘lesson studies’ have allowed them to seek opportunities to cultivate their learning. The lesson studies are learning and teaching cycles that allow teachers to ask colleagues and administrators to observe them and provide meaningful feedback around best instructional practices. The collaborative planning group lessons focus students on the skill of comparing, analyzing and evaluating sources. Students will analyze primary and secondary sources on the topics and answer a set of questions about reliability and sourcing. One person teaches it, we all observe and then give feedback in our PLC. We try to improve the lesson using peer editing until every person has taught, and been observed. We are literally in the middle of it, we observed another class today, but it seems like a great process of using the expertise of our peers to improve instruction.”

The PLC is a pilot group that has been providing professional training around the organizational structure of the lesson studies and helping staff develop positive classroom

environments, social groupings and best instructional practices so all students have access to learning objectives. Through planning, observation, teacher and student reflection and adaptation, the PLC teachers have experienced increased engagement, participation and improvement in classroom attendance. Most importantly students feel valued, because multiple teachers have collaborated to design lessons that are innovative and dynamic to fit student's instructional needs.

The results of these efforts are becoming evident as the PLC continues to implement their learning and make improvements based on our reflections and data, where it is available. The overall outcomes have been impressive considering the small scale of the work.

“The National Board work being done this year in our school's PLCs has already had a remarkable impact on our building's culture. These groups of teachers have begun the process of utilizing the NBC body of knowledge in their own classrooms and, even more importantly, have engaged in conversations with their colleagues throughout the building. These conversations are elevating the dialog that teachers have about their pedagogy and their impact on students. I have witnessed teachers involved in their PLCs asserting

their vision for student success in faculty meetings, impromptu conversations in the hallways/offices and in parent meetings discussing challenges that students face. The teachers involved support each other and have created a PLC environment that welcomes risk-taking and embraces ‘failure as feedback.’ These teachers are role models for our faculty to emulate, and they are willing to take ownership of initiatives that they feel are important and that will impact student success.

— *Chris Chank, NBCT, 12th grade cohort principal*

Through all of the hardships Schenectady High School students and staff have faced, we are prevailing as a building that is offering a beacon of opportunity for student choice. The hope is that our schools' diversity becomes our strength. Students at Schenectady High School have been using their voice for years; now people are listening. Many of these students will continue to return as visiting alumni and some will as educators. The system of concrete walls no longer appears as a barrier, but offers opportunity for expression and hope.

Changing organizational behaviors requires an examination of existing behaviors as well as an incremental approach to addressing difficult

The teachers involved support each other and have created a PLC environment that welcomes risk-taking and embraces ‘failure as feedback.’ These teachers are role models for our faculty to emulate, and they are willing to take ownership of initiatives that they feel are important and that will impact student success.

## Closing the Opportunity Gap through a Culture of Care



*Schenectady County Human Rights  
2018 Award Winners*

barriers that stand in the way of the intended outcome. At Schenectady High School we first developed a theory of action by implementing a culturally responsive model in our schools. We believe that if we create culturally responsive schools where relationships are key, we have solid rigorous routines for students, we are explicitly teaching social and emotional competencies, and are responding to individual student needs, we will help students to feel safer, more connected to staff and school, and able to succeed academically. A key component in this work is addressing the issue of race. As a building we are all in different ideological places when it pertains to the conversation of race, so we circled up and talked about it.

The core principles of collaboration with all stakeholders being at the table is an integral part of improving student outcomes. Asking who should be at the table to solve problems is an important first step. If an administrator of color felt the system required him to have students of color arrested, it is the misconception of the system, not the individual. Members of our staff are all at different points in their careers, and creating a safe space for conversation was a key component to addressing difficult questions around race. Many times, who is at the table is actually more important than the developed solution. Understanding that all people have had different experiences and views on the world is an important foundation to set. Schenectady High School is on a new trajectory, but work based on empathy is never finished.



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## Appendix

### FIVE CORE PROPOSITIONS

#### of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

*The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards seeks to identify and recognize teachers who effectively enhance student learning and demonstrate the high level of knowledge, skills, abilities and commitments reflected in the following five core propositions.*

1. Teachers are committed to students and their learning. Accomplished teachers are dedicated to making knowledge accessible to all students. They act on the belief that all students can learn. They treat students equitably, recognizing the individual differences that distinguish one student from another and taking account of these differences in their practice. They adjust their practice based on observation and knowledge of their students' interests, abilities, skills, knowledge, family circumstances and peer relationships. Accomplished teachers understand how students develop and learn. They incorporate the prevailing theories of cognition and intelligence in their practice. They are aware of the influence of context and culture on behavior. They develop students' cognitive capacity and their respect for learning. Equally important, they foster students' self-esteem, motivation, character, civic responsibility and their respect for individual, cultural, religious and racial differences.
2. Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students. Accomplished teachers have a rich understanding of the subject(s) they teach and appreciate how knowledge in their subject is created, organized, linked to other disciplines and applied to real-world settings. While faithfully representing the collective wisdom of our culture and upholding the value of disciplinary knowledge, they also develop the critical and analytical capacities of their students. Accomplished teachers command specialized knowledge of how to convey and reveal subject matter to students. They are aware of the preconceptions and background knowledge that students typically bring to each subject and of strategies and instructional materials that can be of assistance. They understand where difficulties are likely to arise and modify their practice accordingly. Their instructional repertoire allows them to create multiple paths to the subjects they teach, and they are adept at teaching students how to pose and solve their own problems.
3. Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning. Accomplished teachers create, enrich, maintain and alter instructional settings to capture and sustain the interest of their students and to make the most effective use of time. They also are adept at engaging students and adults to assist their teaching and at enlisting their colleagues' knowledge and expertise to complement their own. Accomplished teachers command a range of generic instructional techniques, know when each is appropriate and can implement them as needed. They are as aware of ineffectual or damaging practice as they are devoted to elegant practice. They know how to engage groups of students to ensure a disciplined learning environment, and how to organize instruction to allow the schools' goals for students to be met. They are adept at setting norms for social interaction among students and between students and teachers. They understand how to motivate students to learn and how to maintain their interest even in the face of

Retrieved from: <https://www.nbpts.org/standards-five-core-propositions/>

## Appendix (continued)

temporary failure. Accomplished teachers can assess the progress of individual students as well as that of the class as a whole. They employ multiple methods for measuring student growth and understanding and can clearly explain student performance to parents.

4. Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience. Accomplished teachers are models of educated persons, exemplifying the virtues they seek to inspire in students — curiosity, tolerance, honesty, fairness, respect for diversity and appreciation of cultural differences — and the capacities that are prerequisites for intellectual growth: the ability to reason and take multiple perspectives to be creative and take risks, and to adopt an experimental and problem-solving orientation. Accomplished teachers draw on their knowledge of human development, subject matter and instruction, and their understanding of their students to make principled judgments about sound practice. Their decisions are not only grounded in the literature, but also in their experience. They engage in lifelong learning which they seek to encourage in their students. Striving to strengthen their teaching, accomplished teachers critically examine their practice, seek to expand their repertoire, deepen their knowledge, sharpen their judgment and adapt their teaching to findings, ideas and theories.
5. Teachers are members of learning communities. Accomplished teachers contribute to the effectiveness of the school by working collaboratively with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development and staff development. They can evaluate school progress and the allocation of school resources in light of their understanding of state and local educational objectives. They are knowledgeable about specialized school and community resources that can be engaged for their students' benefit, and are skilled at employing such resources as needed. Accomplished teachers find ways to work collaboratively and creatively with parents, engaging them productively in the work of the school.



# *“I don’t want to forget my language”:* A case for culturally relevant heritage language literacy instruction in schools

## SUMMARY

The Syracuse City School District’s Steps to the Seal program encourages students to view their heritage language as an academic resource and assists them in developing literacy skills to prepare them to attain the Seal of Biliteracy. The program increases family engagement by inviting families to participate, seeking their input, and emphasizing the role of family, language, and culture in education.

### *Culturally responsive teaching is a core tenet*

of the Syracuse City School District Strategic Plan (2017), which states, “Culturally responsive education acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates culture, and provides equitable access to education for all students.”

The English as a New Language (ENL) Department’s Steps to the Seal program takes a community-based approach to culturally responsive teaching to improve classroom practice, learn from community members, and encourage students to advocate for the use of their language in the classroom. Through this program, we recognize that our multilingual learners have a wide body of linguistic and cultural knowledge beyond what they demonstrate in

English. This program aims to be culturally responsive through opportunities to use and develop linguistic skills in the students’ heritage languages within an academic setting.

Steps to the Seal is a districtwide heritage language literacy initiative available for students in grades 1–12 in some of our district’s high incidence, or requested, languages. Within the Syracuse City School District, these languages include: Karen, Somali, Arabic, Spanish and Nepali. The languages taught in this program reflect the student population of the district, the vocalized interest of the community, and the availability of heritage language teachers in those languages. During each session of this program students work with heritage language teachers and ENL teachers on multi-genre projects in their heritage

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**Emily Voegler, Syracuse Teachers Association**  
**Erica Daniels, Syracuse Teachers Association**

language to build connections between their linguistic practices at home and their linguistic practices at school, preparing them to attain the Seal of Biliteracy.

### **Rationale**

The rationale for school-based programs that develop and integrate students' heritage languages is centered in a pedagogical perspective focused on curricula that is culturally responsive to the student population. According to the National Center of Education Statistics (2018), English language learners (ELLs), made up 8 percent of all public school students in New York State, and the percentage of ELLs in public schools nationwide has increased from 8.1 percent to 9.5 percent since 2000. New York State also uses the terms multilingual learners (MLLs) or emergent bilinguals (EBs) for this population of students as these terms more accurately represent their wide-ranging linguistic capabilities. For this article, we will be using the term multilingual learners because our students consistently use, and are developing, two or more languages.

Echoing the national data, the MLL student population continues to grow significantly within the district's total

student population. In 2008, the MLL student population comprised approximately 8 percent of the total student population. As of the 2018–19 school year, the current MLL student population has grown more than 100 percent and is now 18 percent of the total district population. The Syracuse City School District serves students who speak 84 different languages.

With the growing linguistic diversity among our student population comes the opportunity to design culturally and linguistically responsive programs that build the academic literacy of our students in their heritage languages. This rationale for the development of programs and instructional practices that build on students' full linguistic repertoire is further strengthened by the research-based benefits of biliteracy and multiliteracy.

### **Research**

While Steps to the Seal as a program is still in its infancy, the benefits of biliteracy are well documented. Steps to the Seal is centered on the principles of sociocultural theory of learning and dynamic bilingualism. Vygotsky



"Tigrinya, that's actually who I am and where I am from. Tigrinya is in me."

— Senait, SCSD high school student

## A case for culturally relevant heritage language literacy instruction in schools

Rather than focusing on English as a body of knowledge for students to acquire, we are conceptualizing our students' full linguistic repertoires as tools for them to mediate learning and co-construct ways of knowing within the context of their community and classroom.

(1986) posits that language is a cultural tool that mediates the development of higher cognitive processes in learners. Language is the instrument through which learners transfer communicative and cognitive skills from the interpersonal, or external, to intrapersonal, or internal (Vygotsky, 1987). Building on Vygotsky's ideas, Park (2005) states that the process of meaning making with others by using language allows for the development of a student's ability to use language effectively on their own. This focus on social construction of meaning, interaction-based development, and the central role of language in development influenced the design of a project-based curriculum for this program that would require collaboration between students, teachers, parents, and community members.

The Steps to the Seal program has also been influenced by theories of dynamic bilingualism, one which posits speakers have a linguistic repertoire that holds all of their linguistic skills across languages (García, 2009). The linguistic practices of individuals, or students, develop as they react to their social context, and understand language practices as social practices rather than a discrete body of knowledge separate from its social context (Pennycook, 2010). Just as linguistic practices are tools for creating meaning in social contexts, they are also tools to construct meaning and ways of knowing in classroom contexts for our

MLLs. Rather than focusing on English as a body of knowledge for students to acquire, we are conceptualizing our students' full linguistic repertoires as tools for them to mediate learning and co-construct ways of knowing within the context of their community and classroom.

In a multilingual classroom you might hear or see students speaking, reading, writing, or listening in a mix of different languages to participate in learning activities. The act of translanguaging, and using the heritage languages of students, as a pedagogical resource depends on students first feeling comfortable using their heritage languages in the classroom. It also requires that the students and teachers see their full linguistic repertoire as an educational asset. This is an important component of the ENL department's Steps to the Seal program because we aim to have students use, and advocate for the use of, their heritage languages within their classroom communities.

Research demonstrates that biliteracy produces cognitive and social benefits. Bilingual children can benefit from language transfer, or the transfer of literacy skills between languages (Geva & Siegel, 2000; Oller & Eilers, 2002). A meta-analysis by Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass (2005) found that students in bilingual education programs had higher achievement levels on standardized tests than students in English-only

Investing in heritage language classes, we are developing cognitive skills that will benefit students throughout their education.

programs. These studies show that by investing in heritage language classes, we are developing cognitive skills that will benefit students throughout their education.

There are also cultural benefits to biliteracy in academic settings, which can also refer to the accessibility of written language and the practical literacy abilities that populations have in different settings (García, Bartlett, & Kleifgen, 2006). This conception of biliteracy also engages with the values each literary practice has based on the social position and power of that language. This is relevant because the integration of heritage languages in English-only schools is a social justice issue as well as an academic issue.

Social and cultural settings contribute to the development of linguistic repertoires based on social and cultural opportunities to engage with different linguistic systems (García, et al., 2006). Therefore, by engaging students in heritage language literacy classes, we both increase their ability to engage in literacy in diverse environments, and increase their exposure to their language and culture in an academic setting.

“We don’t use Karen in school. I want to so I can read I guess, because right now I’m starting to forget how to read. I used to know how to read and write in Karen, but since I just learn English I’m

starting to forget my language. I don’t want to forget my language. Now I feel like I’m totally lost.”

— *Kaw Lah Hay,*  
*SCSD high school student*

Kaw Lah Hay tells the story of countless linguistically diverse children who have lost their heritage language in the process of becoming assimilated into the English-only environments of school and society. Her sentiments inspired the goals of the district’s Steps to the Seal program. The first goal of this project is to assist students in developing literacy skills in their heritage language to prepare them to attain the Seal of Biliteracy upon graduation. The second goal of this project is to encourage students to view their heritage language as a resource with an important role in their school and community and to encourage them to develop it in and out of school. Finally, this project seeks to increase family engagement in schools by encouraging them to view themselves as stakeholders in the education process.

### **Meeting the community where they are**

The setting of Syracuse City School District’s Step to the Seal program is critical to its success. The North Side Learning Center is a community-based organization located in a multicultural neighborhood where many of Syracuse’s culturally and linguistically

## A case for culturally relevant heritage language literacy instruction in schools



*Nationality workers share their community's history with Karen students, integrating stories into the classroom curriculum and environment.*

diverse families reside. It has deep ties to the community, which makes it a welcoming environment for our students and families to learn together. The District's ENL Department and The North Side Learning Center share the vision of developing positive cross-cultural attitudes to promote bilingualism, which makes it an ideal location for the program.

The program's setting has also been flexible and responsive to the needs of the community. When one of the Bhutanese parents suggested that hosting the Nepali class in a more central community location would foster more participation, we promptly relocated the classes to the Bhutanese Community Center. The Bhutanese Community Center is located within a business owned by one of the families that participated in the project. This location was familiar and comfortable

to the Nepali community. The learning environment at the Bhutanese Community Center played a significant role in the number of participants and the development of the Nepali language.

The Step to the Seal program has served more than 200 multilingual learners ranging from kindergarten to 12th grade. Student participants are members of the district and come from multiple buildings within the district. Students represent a diverse assortment of linguistic capabilities, ranging from entering level ENL students to students who have strong literacy skills in multiple languages.

### **Practice: Program, Methods, Approach**

Participants in the Steps to the Seal program engage in weekly heritage language classes. The project runs two, 12-week sessions after school at the North Side Learning Center. Each language classroom includes a heritage language instructor, an ENL teacher, and a district nationality worker. Heritage language instructors in this project are hired through a partnership between the Syracuse City School District and the Northside Learning Center. They represent and teach in the following languages: Nepali, Burmese, Karen, Somali, Swahili, Tigrinya, and Arabic. Weekly classes include opportunities





*Karen student memoir book*

for cooperative learning, vocabulary building, family engagement and exposure to heritage language through authentic text. All instructional staff take part in an orientation to align everyone to the goals of the project and are provided weekly collaborative planning time. Project coordinators offer the instructional staff a curricular outline with weekly objectives, a pacing guide, and suggested activities.

The first session of Steps to the Seal engaged elementary and middle school students in the development of a personal memoir in their heritage language. Personal memoirs include compelling stories surrounding compelling themes: family, language, culture, immigration journey, life in Syracuse, and hopes for the future. The classroom environment is enriched with heritage language anchor charts, and vocabulary cards for students to reference. Participants are provided digital cameras to capture images related to the themes and include them in their personal memoirs. Each student exits the program with their own

multilingual multimedia memoir book that includes writing, photographs, images, diagrams, and illustrations.

The second semester of the program engages high school students in heritage language classes with the focus on developing a multi-genre project, a component required to obtain the New York State Seal of Biliteracy. Project instructors support students as they select, research, and explore a topic in the target language. Students select four genres from a list of project choices (two from listening and speaking and two from reading and writing) that will guide them through the development of the project. Examples of genre choices include but are not limited to: a PowerPoint presentation, an interview, a commercial, an online article, memoir, or informational flier. Participants communicate their ideas and impressions about their chosen topic by means of a student presentation.

Each semester concludes with a community celebration. Student participants are awarded certificates of completion to acknowledge their dedication to biliteracy. Books are displayed in the respective language classrooms and students provide brief presentations of their work. A multicultural potluck dinner is served to the community as an additional way to celebrate the value of diversity.

*Student achievement celebration*



## A case for culturally relevant heritage language literacy instruction in schools

Instruction that builds on students' full linguistic repertoire, and engages their heritage language(s) is a fundamental component of culturally relevant education for multilingual learners.

“They learn about their background in refugee camp and what is situation in US. Even though they're from the refugee camp in Thailand they don't know what the situation is there. It's important for students to know to remember the past, don't forget your culture and don't forget the past. Now we tell them study hard, focus their dream because now they have good opportunities and they can help other people.”

— *Koko Lwin, SCSD Nationality Worker*

### **Culturally Relevant Education and Collaboration with the Community**

Instruction that builds on students' full linguistic repertoire, and engages their heritage language(s) is a fundamental component of culturally relevant education for multilingual learners.

Language is a critical aspect of students' identities, their home lives, and worldviews. By bridging students' English identity that they typically use at school, and their heritage language(s) identity, educators can engage the whole child, and access their funds of knowledge.

While this program strives to be culturally relevant through heritage language usage and development, it also aims for a culturally relevant curriculum and cultural relevance through community input. Through the creation of a memoir project, heritage language teachers were encouraged to use teaching strategies that were familiar and relevant to their communities. All cultures do not approach literacy instruction in the same way, and it would be counter to the mission of the program to impose English literacy strategies on our heritage language classes. Some teachers chose to implement a mix of strategies they were familiar with from their home countries and strategies that the children were familiar with in their U.S. schools.

*Nepalese language class with families*



In addition to a culturally relevant curriculum, the program has collaborated with community members to determine the languages that should be represented based on community interest and teacher availability. In the first two cycles of the program, the North Side Learning Center supported the program by recruiting teachers and seeking community input. The North Side Learning Center and the district ENL Department worked together to recruit students, and determine the best time for classes to take place.

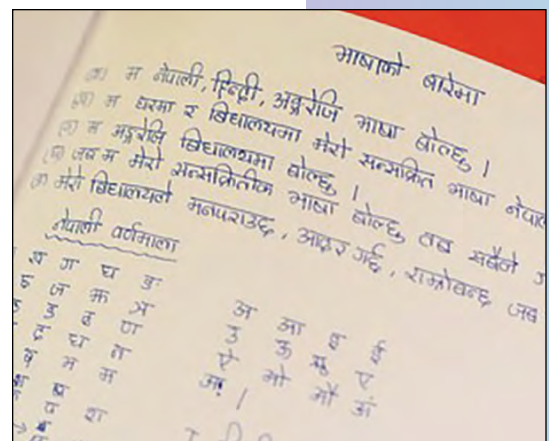
During this process, a high school student reached out to her ENL teacher to ask why her language, Tigrinya (a Semitic language spoken by the people of Eritrea), was not being represented. The teacher asked her if she knew of anyone who could teach the class. The student immediately recommended her brother, a high school senior to lead the class. Together they reached out to their community and recruited students and parents to participate in Tigrinya classes.

Another example of the central role of community members in the continuing development of the district's Steps to the Seal program is demonstrated by the district's nationality workers who have consistently shared their expertise and connections to their linguistic communities to make the

program more culturally and linguistically relevant for the students and their families. Together with the heritage language and ENL teachers, they have worked to invite families to share their immigration stories with our classes. They have stressed the importance of sharing their community's history with the children who are too young to remember why they came to Syracuse, and have integrated these stories into the classroom curriculum and environment. Beyond this, the nationality workers have helped to make the heritage language classrooms comfortable environments for our diverse learners, and have built connections between the educators, families, and students that are meaningful and significant for the sustainability of the program.

Based on these experiences from the piloting of this program in the summer of 2018 and the 2018–19 school year, it is clear that collaboration with the community is a critical point for the cultural relevance of this program and its instruction and the sustainability of programs like this. In the case of expansion to additional community-based organizations, schools, or locations, it is clear that the program would need to be flexible and responsive to the voices and considerations of the community.

**Nepali  
student book**



## A case for culturally relevant heritage language literacy instruction in schools

If students, families, and educators see heritage languages as resources for the classroom, they can become advocates for the maintenance of our rich linguistic and cultural diversity.

### Data Collection

To observe or measure whether we are meeting the goals of this program, we will take a mixed methods approach.

**Goal 1:** To measure our first goal, we will compare the number of Seal of Biliteracy recipients from future years to previous years, and include comparisons of students who participated in the project and those who did not. This will determine if students are using the Steps to the Seal program as a resource to obtain this distinction. We need to take a longitudinal approach because many of the students in our high school's program are in 10th and 11th grade, and over half are enrolled in the elementary 12-week program. To better understand whether we are increasing heritage language literacy in the short term, we will implement a pretest/posttest for students using prompts and rubrics developed by our heritage language teachers.

**Goal 2:** The second goal is to increase student perception that their heritage language is an important academic resource, and to understand the outcomes related to this goal we need direct feedback from the students. To address this, we would like to administer student surveys before and after they participate to better understand how they view their heritage language. Student surveys will be differentiated

based on age level, and will directly reference what role they believe heritage languages play in schools and communities.

**Goal 3:** To observe family engagement, we have informally noted family attendance in classes, feedback on curriculum, and contributions to program development. We have noticed that families are more involved at the elementary and middle school levels. In the future, we will implement parent sign in sheets, and translated surveys at the end of each program cycle to better understand which elements of the project increased family participation.

**Goal 4:** A final data collection method that provides deeper insight into the perception of the teachers and students has been informal interviews. We have used these interviews to better understand how students feel about using their heritage language, and what their language use in schools currently looks like. We have also acquired data on the motivations of teachers, Nationality Workers, and students for participating in the program. The responses we have received have been invaluable resources as the ENL department's Steps to the Seal program is modified for the future.

## Discussion

During the first year of the program, we have focused on: encouraging students and teachers to view heritage languages as a resource in the classroom and community, increasing awareness of the Seal of Biliteracy, benefits of biliteracy, and the opportunities for biliterate students among schools, families, and community members, and developing students' literacy skills in heritage languages. With these goals in mind, we have worked with families, community members, students, and teachers to collaborate toward culturally relevant instruction.

While this program is implemented through the work of heritage language teachers, nationality workers, and ENL teachers, its implications reach across content areas in schools. In the district, all teachers who interact with MLLs are teachers of MLLs regardless of content area, and all teachers can integrate students' heritage languages into the classroom. When there is increased awareness about the benefits of biliteracy and multiliteracy for the individual and community, and increased awareness of the benefits of heritage language integration in the classroom, there will be more opportunities for our students to use their heritage language in academic settings. We hope that this program builds a connection in students' minds between their heritage language and their school community. If students, families, and educators see heritage languages as resources for the classroom, they can become advocates for the maintenance of our rich linguistic and cultural diversity.

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# Cultural Awareness and Self-Awareness at Thurgood Marshall Academy

## SUMMARY

In collaboration with valuable partners and the full school community, Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School is finding success centering social emotional learning and emotional intelligence building practices in a culturally responsive approach. By incorporating mindfulness and self-awareness practices while celebrating the identities and cultures of the school community, the school has been able to build trust, safety and a positive self-concept in students.

*Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School*, under the leadership of founding Principal Sean L. Davenport, opened in 2005 through a unique collaboration between Abyssinian Development Corporation, New Visions for Public Schools and the NYC Department of Education with a mission toward cultural awareness, culturally responsive teaching and learning. As a school community, TMALS or PS 318 has worked feverishly to shield their children and families from system-wide priorities that have ignored them, and instead have chosen to devote their time to preparing their students for the excellence they already see in them.

The school's mission also includes an emphasis on small class size, the arts, social justice, emotional intelligence and building an increased self-concept.

Reverend Calvin O. Butts III, Pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church and President of SUNY College at Old Westbury, is the visionary for the school. In 1989, he created Abyssinian Development Corporation (ADC), a non-profit community and economic development corporation with a mission to rebuild and serve the Harlem community through real estate development, education, civic engagement and social services (“Abyssinian Development Corporation — Our History,” n.d.). The ADC mission was to rebuild Harlem, “brick by brick and block by

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***Danica Goyens-Ward had taught at the elementary level for the past 14 years. She currently teaches fourth-grade students at Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School and serves as a peer collaborative teacher, data coach and inquiry team member. A devoted basketball and softball mom who loves running and yoga practice, Goyens-Ward is a member of the United Federation of Teachers.***

***Ife Gaskin-Lenard, MSW, EdM, serves as a strategic coach, professor and educational consultant. Gaskin-Lenard started her career as a school-linked social worker before teaching biology and physics. Her service-leadership has created schools and programs that build relationships in a different, more humane way. Gaskin-Lenard is an associate professor at City College and a member of the Professional Staff Congress.***

**Dawn Brooks DeCosta, Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School**  
**Danica Goyens Ward, United Federation of Teachers**  
**Ife Gaskin-Lenard, Professional Staff Congress**

block”. As part of ADC’s educational mission, Butts envisioned an educational corridor of learning. ADC was running several head start programs at the time, and had opened Thurgood Marshall Academy high school and middle school.

PS 318 was created to fill a gap in the educational corridor so families who wished, could have their children begin in Head Start and continue all the way through school with the same philosophy of learning. Harlem, the home of the school, was one of the settling places for African Americans migrating from the South during the Jim Crow Era and the Great Migration, and it emerged into a vibrant community, rich in culture and history. However, as a community, Harlem has remained historically underserved. Even with the “progress,” that has come with gentrification, pockets of Harlem experience neighborhood violence, a persistent lack of resources and inadequate access to health care, which can all contribute to the mortality rate of African

Americans in segregated communities (Collins & Williams, 1999). The ghettoization of Harlem persists as segregation persists, and “black isolation deepened,” during the 1970’s when the ghetto “gave birth to a permanent underclass, (Massey & Denton, 1998, p. 61).” In relation to poverty in communities and education, Ladson Billings & Tate (1995) note that,

While some might argue that poor children, regardless of race, do worse in school, and that the high proportion of African American poor contributes to their dismal school performance, we argue that the cause of their poverty in conjunction with the condition of their schools and schooling is institutional and structural racism (p. 55).

### TMALS Mission Statement

The mission of Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School is grounded in the belief that all children can learn and have the fundamental right to reach their fullest, individual potential. As a reflection of the African proverb, ***‘It takes a village to raise a child’***, our school values parent partnerships and collaborative efforts with various community-based organizations, businesses and other institutions within and outside the Harlem community.

— *Founding staff*

Teachers are using the culture of the students as “a vehicle for learning”.

## Guiding Principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching at Thurgood Marshall Academy

When describing urban school environments, Khalifa, Gooden & Davis (2011) note that “developing effective leaders, becomes a vital part of the process of recruiting and retaining the best teachers for children who have been marginalized (p. 1,273).” The need for culturally responsive education was central to Butts’ vision for the Thurgood Marshall Academy schools as an educational vehicle to combat surrounding ills.

With its population of mostly Black and Brown students, and based on the original vision for the school, the

curriculum outlined by the founding principal and staff focuses around culturally relevant topics and units. The goal of situating students’ cultures at the center would enhance their learning and ultimate success in school. Geneva Gay (2000) notes that, “the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters (p.106).”

Our culturally relevant approach follows a framework designed by Gloria Ladson-Billings who coined the term “culturally relevant pedagogy.” The three major areas of her framework include a focus on “Academic Success, Cultural Competence and Critical Consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160-162).” As this framework is a central focus at PS 318, striving toward academic success is a non-negotiable. We use the following three tenets as our approach to culturally relevant and responsive learning: High Expectations for Academic Success, Culturally Relevant Texts and Units of Study and Social Emotional Learning for All Members of the School Community. Aligned with the Ladson-Billings’ study, our teachers “demand, reinforce and produce academic excellence in their students (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160)” through a framework of non-negotiable best practices where all students are pushed to own the learning and strive for excellence.

## Demographics

### Community School Geographical District 5, Central Harlem

- 33 public schools, including PS 318
- 11,966 K–12 students.
- 89.4 % of students are Black and Latino
- 80.6% poverty rate
- 21.4% are identified as students with disabilities

### Thurgood Marshall Academy (PS 318)

- 221 students
- 78% Black and 16 % Latino
- 17% Students with Disabilities
- 77% poverty rate
- 91% attendance rate

Source: New York State Education Department 2017



Teachers hold students to a high expectation, providing rigorous learning tasks in various subject areas where students are pushed to collaborate, discuss, provide feedback to one another and make their thinking visible therefore helping them to facilitate their own learning. The perspective of dedicated, invested teachers who believe and know that, “all students can and must succeed,” is essential to this approach (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 163). Through the use of culturally relevant texts and culturally competent lesson planning approaches, teachers are using the culture of the students as “a vehicle for learning” where parents and family members are also engaged to participate and share their “cultural knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161).”

### **Culturally Responsive Classroom Lessons Bring Ideas to Life**

To illuminate through example, collaboration with the Studio Museum in Harlem gave second graders the opportunity to take part in a six-week unit of study on community and to delve into the works of community-artist Jordan Casteel who spectacularly depicts the strength and beauty of African American males of the community. Students were able to meet with Casteel to ask questions about her work, create their own works of art, and engage in a community tour visiting many of the places where she paints her subjects. Along the walk



they engaged community members, who were beautiful reflections of themselves and their family members. The young learners studied artist Romare Bearden who also reflected Harlem and Black life in his works in more of a historic sense. On the community walk students were also able to see the areas where he created his works. Through this experience, our inquisitive second graders were able to engage in a physical experience learning about the contributions of Black leaders and artists during the Harlem Renaissance. They were comfortable visiting The Studio Museum of Harlem to view original works of art as well as to be invited into grand discussions around artists’ pieces. To culminate the unit, the second grade families participated in a family art project facilitated by The Studio Museum and The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), both of whom have had strong and longstanding partnerships with PS 318.

*Third grade students participate in an art lesson with The Studio Museum in Harlem in their “Find Art Here” program. Artist Jordan Casteel discusses the artwork with students.*

## Cultural Awareness and Self-Awareness at Thurgood Marshall Academy



*Above: Parent Cultural Ambassadors at the Charles White exhibit at the MoMA.*

*At right: A first grader re-enacts the Charles White painting of Harry Belafonte at the TMALS Family Art Night at the MoMA.*



The focus on critical consciousness, defined by Paulo Freire (2009) as a tool used to immerse learners in their social and historical contexts is also actively reflected in our school's daily practices. Ladson-Billings notes that, "students must develop a broader socio-political consciousness which allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" and "engage the world and others critically (1995, p. 162)." As such, fifth-grade students participated in an in-class debate around the controversy of the NFL national anthem

protest. Students researched both sides of the argument to gain a variety of perspectives, while learning about the formalities of protagonist and antagonist before practicing debate strategies. Students were able to express their personal concerns in a safe context. The teacher, Anthony Hovanec explained to students, "The better that you understand both sides of the argument the better you will be able to debate." Having students write an opinion piece is primarily routine, however, using a topic relevant to their social and historic content lifted the level of critical consciousness in the lesson. After watching several clips and reports on the protest, one young African American male student in the class shared, "He should kneel because this is a protest. The President said, 'The police need to be more vicious with these hoodlums.' He took a stand, he could vote and he can take a knee and make it easier." The teacher asked, "What do you mean by easier?" The student responded, "Make it easier to protest. It's easier than being stopped by the police." This student had already, at age 10, gained a familiarity with police brutality and racism as personally connected experiences. Another student with another perspective said, "You can lose your job like Colin Kaepernick . . . you are focusing on one thing when there are more problems for Black people than the national anthem."

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Through experiences in the lesson, the teacher created a space where students were able to share their opinions, ground them in facts and at the same time, listen to and reflect on perspectives that were contrary to their own. Through a rich discussion, facilitated by the teacher, the students were able to connect to the Black Lives Matter Movement through a literacy lesson and a series of skill-building exercises.

While engaging in a topic that was real world connected and relevant to the students, the teacher taught the skill of analysis and debate while preparing students for a written opinion piece. Engaging students in the experiential piece of the project made the learning that much richer. The teacher shared the WHY with students saying, “In order to become successful opinion writers and debaters, it is essential to understand both sides of the argument and to honor facts more than our emotional preference or attachments.” Students will have gained a skill they will use throughout their educational careers and life beyond.

### **Developing Culturally Relevant Teaching Practices**

Our teachers and administrators also worked on honing innovation and competencies within literacy for two years with Ghody Muhammad, who specializes in social and historical African American literacy development

and African American adolescent literacy. In collaboration with Scholastic, she worked to prepare administrators and staff to lead culturally responsive pedagogy in their schools. Muhammad’s research around the literacy practices of Black people in the early 19th century led her to intensive research on the ways in which schools today can employ the same expectation for excellence that was evident in Black communities long ago.

Through a district grant, Muhammad provided professional development for our staff centered on her construct for culturally responsive pedagogy. PS 318 staff were trained to utilize Muhammad’s “Four Layered Equity Model” for culturally responsive lesson planning and lesson delivery. Each goal is intended to help advance students in four areas:

- 1) Skills and proficiencies;
- 2) Intellectual development;
- 3) Identity development; and
- 4) Criticality (reading and writing to understand truth and power)

(Price-Dennis, Muhammad, Womack, McArthur, & Haddix, 2017, p. 8).

Danica Goyens-Ward, a founding teacher at our school, participated in this collaborative initiative with Muhammad in 2016–18.

For our students, daily exposure to models of excellence of those who look like them is integral to the development of positive self-concept.

Goyens-Ward serves as the Cultural Relevance Lead for the school. She was a key player, as colleague and lead, to model and support her fellow teachers on how to merge daily pedagogy and cultural relevance while infusing newly acquired concepts learned from Muhammad.

PS 318 has three model teachers in culturally relevant and responsive practices through the Department of Education's Learning Partners Program. The lead team of model teachers along with the principal and assistant principal are currently working on defining with research-based evidence, what PS 318 finds most important in what we are now referring to as not just culturally relevant but also culturally responsive practices.

At PS 318, the culturally responsive mission extends far beyond Black

History Month when many students learn about leaders and artists who look like them. For our students, daily exposure to models of excellence of those who look like them is integral to the development of positive self-concept. Teachers are able to teach the concepts and skills of reading, writing, mathematics, science, art and social studies while using text, resources and role models that depict images which allow students to identify with people who resemble their parents, grandparents, neighbors and relatives in their learning. This connection with multiple references deepens learning and real-world connections. The work of dedicated PS 318 teachers, leaders, families, and students alike sustains an awareness of heritage; they are cultured and talented. With that, their school community offers multiple opportunities to add value to their culture and talents and display their multiple intelligences and cultured talents.

## Voices

"Now, I know more about other cultures and more about my own culture. It makes me feel good."

— *Fourth-grade student*

"You get to understand people better when you learn about their culture."

— *Grandparents Club member*

"Cultural relevancy has impacted my classroom because it allows students to learn about other cultures and respect and appreciate others' differences. It also allows me to know and learn about my students as individuals."

— *Alicia Linder, TMALS third-grade teacher*

## Immersing Students in Culture

As early as Kindergarten, children recite and interpret the poetry of Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Classrooms are named after Harlem landmarks such as: National Black Theatre, Mount Morris Park, Abyssinian, Mother Zion, Rucker Park, Apollo Theater, Harlem Armory, Schomburg Center, Liberty Hall, Hotel Theresa

The ties between emotional intelligence and student behavior, decreased bullying, increased self-concept and enhanced social skills have repeatedly been proven.

and Harlem Grown. Each morning in a schoolwide community circle, students begin their day with a town hall family meeting where they recite the school creed written by founding teachers:

*I am proud to be me, I can learn,  
read and I can do anything.*

*I have talents that can shape and  
change the world.*

*I have no true limits as long as I  
believe in myself.*

*I will grow and strive at Thurgood  
Marshall Academy Lower School.*

After the creed, the students learn and recite memorized poems. Then, time is given to analyze one of the poems for meaning, intent and impact. Poems are specifically chosen to represent the historic and current experience of Black people in America — in beauty, strength, hope, contribution and resilience. Some of the Langston Hughes poems recited are *Dreams*, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, and *I Dream a World*. Other recited poems are *Alone* and *Caged Bird* by Maya Angelou as well as *We Wear the Mask* by Paul Laurence Dunbar.

The learning and analysis of poems continues in classroom ELA lessons. Each class has a poem of the month they are learning and analyzing. Students have community and class discussions around the meanings of

the poems, the feelings and emotions expressed in the characters, how they connect to those characters and their feelings and how this is still relevant today.

### **Emotional Intelligence and Mindfulness**

Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (1990) coined the term Emotional Intelligence describing it as “a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action (p. 5).” According to Goleman (2006), “. . . people who are emotionally adept — who know and manage their feelings well, and who read and deal effectively with other people’s feelings — are at an advantage in any domain of life. . . (p. 36).”

The current need for emotional intelligence in schools is clear as noted in research across the field of education and psychology. Students excel when social emotional learning is central. The ties between emotional intelligence and student behavior, decreased bullying, increased self-concept and enhanced social skills have repeatedly been proven. Students with increased emotional intelligence relate more effectively with peers and teachers, and may be able to communicate with more ease during a conflict. There is a strong

There is a strong connection between a child's development of emotional intelligence and friendship management and relationships with teachers.

connection between a child's development of emotional intelligence and friendship management and relationships with teachers. Children with low emotional intelligence exhibit increased frustration, aggression, bullying behaviors and lack communication and friendship building skills. Students with lower emotional intelligence do not always share emotions effectively. They may bottle up emotions leading to anxiety, frustration and anger which may negatively impact their learning (Goleman, 2001). Increased bullying in schools, adolescent suicide, mass school violence, overt interpersonal racism, and decreased academic performance can all take a toll on emotional intelligence. This builds a case for all schools to employ structures for emotionally intelligent teaching and learning practices to enhance school culture and remedy many of the ills that plague students.

But there are additional burdens to children in predominantly African American urban school communities often plagued by the societal ills of racism and poverty. The school's

leadership and staff made a purposeful decision to incorporate self-awareness, emotional intelligence and mindful practices and further seek ways to seamlessly combine them with our culturally relevant approach.

In practice this is what it looks like:

*During the morning community town hall meetings, after the poetry activity and the reading of the school creed, student self-awareness leaders guide the full student body in a schoolwide compassion meditation. Later in classrooms, student self-awareness leaders and teachers also lead the students in yoga brain breaks. The brain breaks are done throughout the day as breathing and movement focusing techniques to re-center students allowing for quick refocusing breaks.*

A culturally responsive approach should have at its core ways in which to address the whole child. The resiliency of African American children who experience poverty, single parent homes, foster care, neighborhoods with increased crime and violence and institutional as well as actualized racism is apparent (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994). Their apparent silent resiliency does not suggest, however, that there is no impact on their learning, ability to focus and their emotional well-being (Connell et al., 1994). Along with children being

## Voices

"When students see their culture, as well as the culture of others in daily lessons, projects, and discussions, they become more engaged and accountable for their learning."

— Debra Turner, TMALS teacher

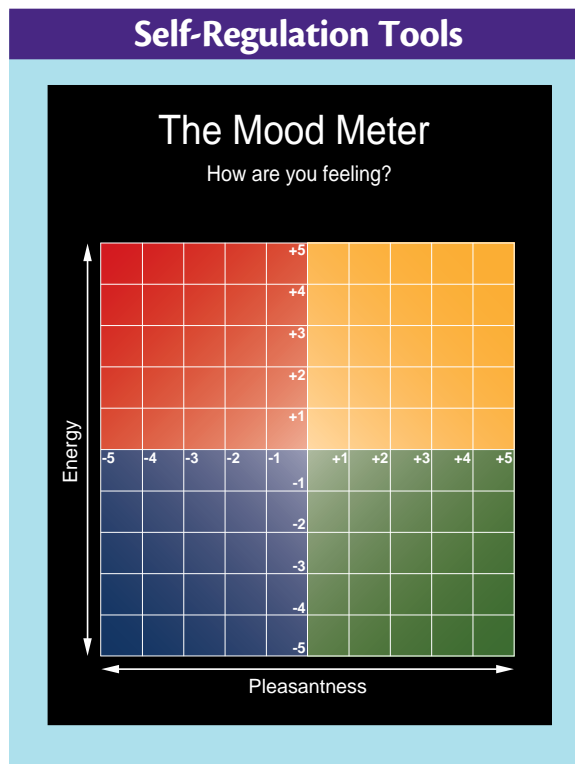
negatively impacted by anxiety, low self-esteem and inability to communicate, they are further compounded with racial trauma and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) which are being associated with those who are directly and indirectly impacted by racial discrimination and violence, specifically African American children (Turner & Richardson, 2016).

### Teaching Self-Regulation

Self-regulation, in terms of emotional intelligence, is a strategy that is used to enable us to become self-aware, recognize our emotions, our triggers, our reactions, and learn to control them, so we can work toward a positive outcome in a stressful situation. When we are not self-regulating, we can experience higher levels of stress, poor decisions, increased conflict, self-harming and reactions to triggers that lead to negative outcomes, further exacerbating the stress of the situation. To help students develop these skills, we use the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence's RULER approach: Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing and Regulating Emotions. Students with higher emotional intelligence show enhanced positive relationships with peers, decreased aggressive behavior and poor decision making, decreased disciplinary action needed and fewer suspensions in comparison to their peers who do not receive SEL support

(Rivers, Brackett, Reyes, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012). RULER is an emotional intelligence-building program that has been woven organically into the very fabric of the school's language, routines and classroom culture after its introduction five years ago.

The program uses imagery in these four anchors to provide visuals in the classroom and school environment. Throughout all classrooms and in hallways you will see a four-color quadrant mood meter that students use to plot themselves on their levels of pleasantness and energy. Students check in on the mood meter in the mornings at breakfast and throughout the day in classrooms. In all classrooms we have class charters, written and signed by



Valuing families as partners in education rather than visitors to the school honors them as change catalysts.

teacher and students detailing how they want to feel in the classroom, what they will do to feel that way and how they will handle conflict. Peer mediators, administrators and the guidance counselor use a “Blueprint” to help students map out a current or past conflict that they need to talk through. The Blueprint serves as a plan for how the students will interact moving forward past the conflict.

This approach is also used for staff and for families so there is a common language and practice for the full school community. This approach has allowed for calmer classrooms, safer spaces for students and more focused instructional time. Families living in poverty experience higher levels of stress. The cognitive abilities of children are affected by stress levels and the effect can span a lifetime (Dreier et al., 2004). Infusing SEL into the school’s culture is an effort to interrupt and disrupt the damage of stress on the lives of children and families. Incorporated mindful practices focused around compassion help students send positive thoughts to those they love, those they argue with, as well as to themselves.

### **Combining Cultural Responsiveness and Social Emotional Learning**

It was vital to combine cultural responsiveness with social-emotional learning

to strengthen students’ resiliency and self-worth; especially for those most vulnerable. It was imperative to first incrementally scaffold information about the benefits of infusing emotional intelligence in the earliest grades. The nurturing relationships with those in the Grandparents Club was instrumental, and maintaining rapport by keeping parents in the loop during monthly meetings told us that these extensive informal networks were also vital. Valuing families as partners in education rather than visitors to the school honors them as change catalysts. Together they would wield the trust required, within the larger school community, as to why and how a culturally responsive approach and social emotional learning would be effective and how it would co-exist. Adults and students alike were establishing a trusting environment where we could share our emotions and feelings.

Vanessa Siddle Walker, Ed.D., has explored segregation and the schooling of African American children and how Black schools in the past employed culturally relevant practices. She has also completed extensive research on the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Walker emphatically describes how the wholesome care and advocacy reflected the culturally relevant ways during that era. This aligns closely with a culturally relevant approach that echoes the underlying premise of social-emotional learning.



We can learn from this era by identifying ways in which modern predominant schools of color may work to reclaim the wholesome care and advocacy that Black educators across schoolhouses and urban schools imparted before desegregation. Tapping into this wholesome care requires an intricate mixture of positivity, high expectations, accountability, affirmations, inspirational leadership and influence in order to enhance institutionalized school culture, student behavior, relationships, teacher team collaboration and more.

The leader is central to driving the school community to recapture these ways of being for our schools. According to Cooper (2009), “Principals have not adequately addressed the cultural tensions and separatist politics that marginalize ethnic and linguistic minority students and their families (p. 695).” Cooper also notes that “. . . transformative leadership constitutes a form of liberatory political praxis, whereby leaders use their positional power to promote democracy, redress inequities, and empower various stakeholders, including marginalized students and families. Through collaborative methods, leaders then develop inclusive governing structures and communities (2009, p. 696).” Through a more culturally aware approach, urban leaders can meet the holistic and fundamental needs of students of color.

For PS 318 the intentionality behind its culturally relevant curricula was thriving especially throughout the components of its English language arts and social studies, but if it were to assert itself as an exemplar more had to be done. Thus, Ife Gaskin-Lenard, educational consultant and professor of education and racial identity development, worked with the school to expand cultural relevance across all content areas. As a former principal, Gaskin-Lenard aligned seamlessly with the school’s intent to respect the inherent dignity and unwavering accountability to its mission and goal for a curricula as rich and worthy as Harlem. With that, persons chosen throughout each content area were also highlighted for their self-sacrifice and a willingness to take great risks for the collective good, or for their unusual will and determination in the face of great danger and against the most stubborn odds. Striving and achieving to go beyond the standard texts has afforded the students at PS 318 scholastic diversity that allows for a richer interdisciplinary perspective. It also shows the larger school community how diversity plays a critical role in shaping the tapestry of elementary education.

### **Professional Learning**

With a commitment to intentional spaces and practices, it was important for Gaskin-Lenard to utilize the staff’s charter of the RULER approach to ensure a diverse method in teacher

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Practices that support a sense of well-being and emotional intelligence can only help a child thrive in the academic world.

development. Comprehensive and scaffolded through a two-year commitment, the objectives were:

1. to encourage personal reflection and to challenge assumptions through the examination of historical issues, cultural forces, and emerging diversity issues within education;
2. to examine the causes and complex dynamics of cultural, racial and social inequities and how they impact learning and instruction in American schools; and to identify ethical professionalism, moral discipline, teaching methods, and emotional competencies;
3. to examine how cultural forces and social structures can override and foster acceptance of diversity, imagination, mindfulness practices and habits of the mind; and
4. to enrich self-and-social awareness through: social science research, literature circles, study, thought-provoking exercises, analysis and collegial dialogue.

Each meaningful entry into this teacher development phase, the teachers were invited to take intellectual risks. It offered vast opportunity to build core knowledge, provide practice to solving problems creatively, think critically, work cooperatively in teams, use technology effectively, and develop positive attitudes around SEL as another layer of culturally relevant teaching and learning.

Ambitious teachers moved toward an inquiry-based approach to support their learning. Teachers interested and actively engaged in a discovery process used their natural curiosity to further explore, discover and learn a range of teaching methods to hold the professional learning environment as sacred. Hence, teacher morale and a feeling that they are valued members of the school community was upheld as a critical part of the professional development program. This was a direct reflection of how they instruct students, hold higher expectations and push students to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and apply higher-ordered thinking tasks toward their own proficiency and mastery. During this process of enhancing the school's instructional program, school leaders, teachers and staff developers alike served as an intellectual resource and teammate of our professional learning community.

One educator shared that, "It centers on history and culture, and simultaneously offers all of us a liberating worthiness as a school community and in this learning experience — a sense that we all matter." She added, "... practices that support a sense of well-being and emotional intelligence can only help a child thrive in the academic world." In working with staff, she recalled a courageous critical conversation about underlining impact and subtleties of the racism of low

expectations for children of color. This conversation led to inspiring and guiding higher expectations through the culturally relevant teaching approach of supportive tone and directness. Additionally, the extension discussions identified how every approach is not applicable for every culture of students.

The sustained focus on supporting education through a cultural awareness and self-awareness lens is paying academic and social dividends. There has been a decrease in incidences of discipline referrals and suspensions, and an impact on student learning and positive experiences in school. We see high levels of student engagement and collaboration across classrooms and grade spans, a prevalent trend in student leadership and voice, and finally, a steady increase of academic achievement on standardized tests. The school saw a 6 percent schoolwide increase in its math state assessment data compared to the year prior. The school's third and fourth graders outperformed their peers in New York City on state math exams; fourth graders also outperformed their peers on ELA exams.

The most profound difference in the teaching and learning experiences at Thurgood Marshall is the investment of time and consistency. It has a genuine school culture of nurture that strives to build and sustain human relationships to enable all to get

phenomenal things done on a regular basis. It is a school environment where people can count on people within their school building to serve as thought-partners. Adults and children can always serve as an intellectual resource to meet needs and add value to one another's lives. It is a school rooted in hosting monthly events and often has a buzz in its hallways about an upcoming event whether the topic is academic, cultural, or social-emotional. Whether discussing social and emotional competencies at the Grandparents Club Community Hour, explaining the school-to-prison pipeline and how punitive discipline in schools disproportionately targets African American students pushing them out of school at much higher rates than their white peers for the same behaviors, holding a 'Day with Dads' session, or sharing meditation and mindfulness during a stress-free spa night for parents, PS 318 ventures to change the status quo, models the way, enables all to do great work and inspires the heart.

The academic needs of students can only be met in an environment that supports who they are as emotional and social people; they are also cultural beings. At Thurgood Marshall we make conscious decisions to ensure that our practices do not further marginalize students. In contrast, we bring them to the center. The transformation we see daily in the school community



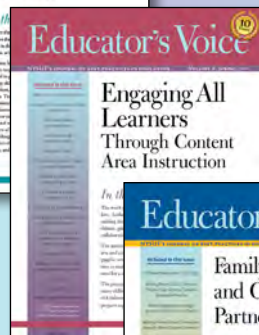
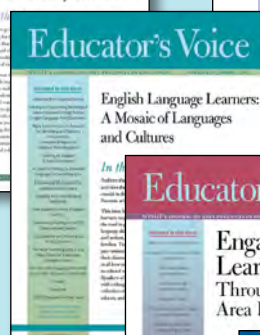
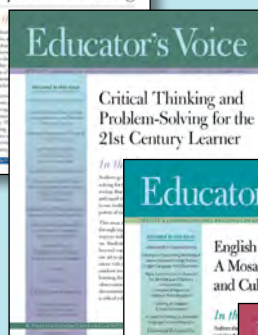
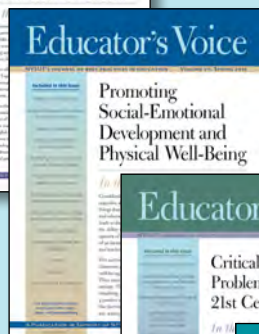
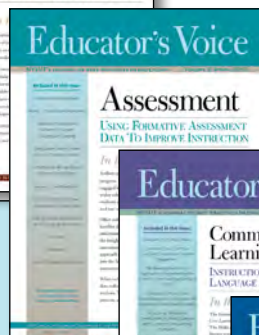
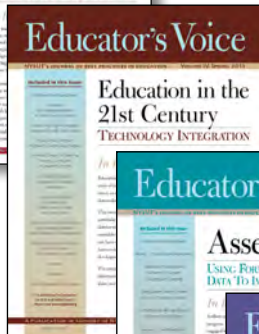
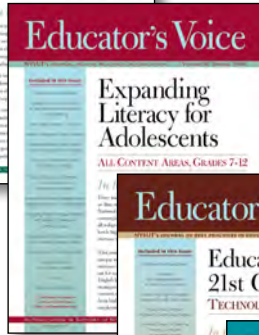
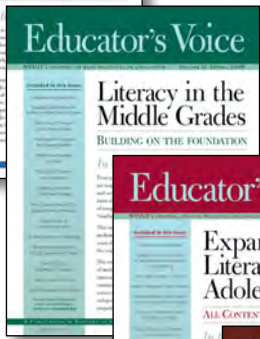
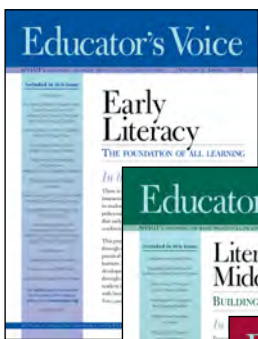
*PS 318 Family  
Art Night at  
MOMA*

is evidence enough for us to want to continue to explore this work of the advancement of Black children as a whole and to support those who nurture and educate them. We continue to be energized by the possibilities and the accomplishments of our children, staff and families.

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# Educator's Voice

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**Volume IX** English Language Learners: A Mosaic of Languages and Cultures

**Volume X** Engaging All Learners through Content Area Instruction

**Volume XI** Family Engagement and Community Partnerships

# Glossary

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## DEFINITIONS

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### **Cultural learning style**

How individuals learn at home and in their communities.

### **Ethnography**

A research strategy that studies people, social groups and their culture. Information can be collected through observations, interviews, questionnaires or participation in a group.

### **Heritage language**

Any language, other than English, that is connected to the speaker's cultural or ethnic background.

### **High-incidence language**

Languages, other than English, that are most commonly spoken by students.

### **Latinx**

Latinx is a gender-neutral term that is used as an alternative to Latino/a. It refers to people whose origin or ancestry is in Latin America and excludes Spain. Geographic location is what separates this term from Hispanic or Spanish. Additionally, the usage of the “x” instead of the “o” or the “an” at the end of the word “Latinx” is important as it's inclusive of those in the Latin community who are gender non-conforming, gender queer, gender fluid, etc.

### **Metacognitive strategies**

Methods used to help students understand the way they learn; in other words, it means processes designed for students to ‘think’ about their ‘thinking.’

### **Translanguaging**

When speakers maximize their communicative functionality by choosing different linguistic features to share their meaning.

# Resources

## **ePals**

At the easy-to-navigate ePals site, teachers and students can collaborate with other teachers and students from over two hundred countries in authentic learning projects. You can join other classrooms in projects that are already in progress or you can design your own project and ask other classrooms to join in.

[cricketmedia.com/company/](http://cricketmedia.com/company/)

## **Global School Net**

This site offers information for teachers about various global projects and how to find the ones that would be a good match for their classes.

[globalschoolnet.org/](http://globalschoolnet.org/)

## **GLOBE**

The Global Learning and Observation to Benefit the Environment (GLOBE) program is a worldwide hands-on, primary and secondary school-based science and education program involving over 25,000 schools worldwide.

[globe.gov/en/about/overview](http://globe.gov/en/about/overview)

## **Inclusive Schools Network**

The Inclusive Schools Network offers resources on culturally responsive teaching including an annotated children's book list and links to other organizations. Their website also includes an FAQ about culturally responsive teaching.

[inclusiveschools.org/category/resources/culturally-responsive-instruction/](http://inclusiveschools.org/category/resources/culturally-responsive-instruction/)

## **International Education and Resource Network**

This extensive site offers opportunities for global collaborative projects through its network of 30,000 schools located in more than 130 countries. It offers numerous project opportunities that cover a wide range of subjects for K-12 students.

[us.iearn.org/](http://us.iearn.org/)

## **NEA**

NEA offers an online guide for culturally responsive teaching. It includes methods of teaching, resources in print and online activities. Another feature called "Ask the Experts" is an online Q&A discussion forum where teachers may submit questions.

[nea.org/archive/16723.htm](http://nea.org/archive/16723.htm)

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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### **NYSED**

#### ***Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education***

NYSED has created resources for educators and families on culturally responsive teaching. The CR-S framework helps educators create student-centered learning environments that: affirm racial, linguistic and cultural identities; prepare students for rigor and independent learning, develop students' abilities to connect across lines of difference; elevate historically marginalized voices; and empower students as agents of social change. The website is expanding. Additional resources for school districts and administrators are currently being developed.

*nysed.gov/crs*

#### **Teaching Tolerance**

A well-known source for educators to find “thought-provoking news, conversation and support for those who care about diversity, equal opportunity and respect for differences in schools.”

*tolerance.org/*



# Students with Disabilities: Access and Equity in the School Community

Under federal and state law and regulation, students with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. However, the provision of special education programs and services is more than a basic educational entitlement. Students with disabilities are to be afforded the same educational access and equity in the school community as their peers without disabilities.

Due to the range of school settings across New York State (e.g., preschool, elementary, middle, secondary; urban, rural, suburban; high-needs schools, low-need schools; public, private, Special Act, state-supported; etc.), providing meaningful access and equity while meeting the individual needs for this population can present unique challenges to educators. While thoughtful planning, professional learning, investment of resources, and the benefit of “lessons learned” are necessary considerations for educators, there is no single path that ensures success. In this volume we will present a range of practices designed to best meet the needs of students with disabilities.

We call for articles from educators across disciplines and grade levels that document successful practices in serving P-12 students with disabilities in their school community, and/or in partnership with institutions of higher education.

**Examples of submission areas include (but are not limited to):**

- Access to the general education curriculum
- Positive behavioral supports
- Skill development for greater independence
- Innovative programs and services
- Family and community engagement
- P-20 Partnerships
- Higher Education Research and Practice
- Participation in extra-curricular and non-academic activities
- Transition planning and support to post-school activities
- Practices that support a positive school climate of integration and community

# Students with Disabilities: Access and Equity in the School Community

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## PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

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**Please tell us about your proposal by referencing each of the following nine elements (approximately 2–5 pages) and submit to NYSUT by Oct. 1, 2019. Please include the element titles.**

**Be sure to complete the author submission sheet and send it in with your proposal.**

- 1) **Title:** What is the working title for your article?
- 2) **Topic:** What do you plan to write about? What practice or program will your article focus on? (Please provide specifics about school(s), grade levels, etc.)
- 3) **Relevance:** Why is this practice relevant to the theme of this year's volume on Culturally Responsive Teaching? Why is this topic important to you?
- 4) **Setting:** Describe your setting and the student population(s) involved in the practice or programs.
- 5) **Practice:** Describe the practice or program and your method or approach.
- 6) **Outcomes:** What are the intended outcomes or indicators of success and how do you plan to measure or observe them?
- 7) **Research Base:** Describe the academic research base that supports your practice. (Please provide specific examples/citations.)
- 8) **Diversity:** How does your practice address the needs of diverse populations?
- 9) **Collaboration:** Explain how your practice involves collaboration with parents or other members of the school community.

### Deadlines for Volume XIII:

Nov. 1, 2019	Proposal submission deadline
Nov. 29, 2019	NYSUT responds to proposal
Jan. 5, 2020	Completed article submission
Fall, 2020	Publication

# Students with Disabilities: Access and Equity in the School Community

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## AUTHOR SUBMISSION FORM

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**Name of Author(s) (If multiple authors, select one author as the primary contact person). At least one author *must* be a NYSUT (or affiliate) member. Please spell out all information, do not use acronyms. All fields are required.**

Primary author's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Union affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of school: \_\_\_\_\_

School/district location: \_\_\_\_\_

Current position (title and grade level/s): \_\_\_\_\_

Next author's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Current position (title and grade level/s): \_\_\_\_\_

Union affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Next author's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Current position (title and grade level/s): \_\_\_\_\_

Union affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Do all of the authors work in the same building? If not, tell us where they work:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Primary Author CONTACT INFO (all fields are required)

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Alternate email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone number: \_\_\_\_\_

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# Students with Disabilities: Access and Equity in the School Community

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## EDITORIAL GUIDELINES

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### Grade and Audience:

Author(s) can describe practices or programs in any grades (P-20) on the topic of access and equity in the school community for students with disabilities.

This is a practitioner journal. Our readers include teachers, school-related professionals, pupil personnel services providers, union leaders, parents, administrators, higher education faculty, researchers, legislators, and policymakers. For examples, please browse previous volumes of *Educator's Voice*.

Please write your article to the practitioner. Authors are encouraged to write in a direct style designed to be helpful to both practitioners and to others committed to strengthening education. All education terms (i.e., jargon, all acronyms) should be defined for a broad audience. For articles with multiple authors, use one voice consistently. Please limit the use of writing in the first person.

### Article Length:

The required article length is flexible. Please submit approximately 2,000 – 3,000 words (or 7–9 double-spaced pages plus references). This is just a range as every article is unique.

### Rights:

**Acceptance of a proposal is not a guarantee of publication.** Publication decisions are made by the Editorial Board. NYSUT retains the right to edit articles. The author will have the right to review changes and if not acceptable to both parties, the article will not be included in *Educator's Voice*. NYSUT may also retain the article for use on the NYSUT website ([www.nysut.org](http://www.nysut.org)) or for future publication in *NYSUT United*.

### Manuscript Basics:

- Use American Psychological Association (APA) 6th edition style for in-text citations and references.
- Do not use footnotes or MLA publishing guidelines.
- Double-space your manuscript.
- Submit your manuscript as a Word document.
- We cannot accept Google documents.
- Do not submit copyrighted material unless you have permission from the publisher.

### Graphics Guidelines:

- Although your images may be embedded in the manuscript for review, please submit all graphics as separate files, too.
- Save all images in high-resolution (300 dpi). Anything downloaded from a website will be low-resolution (72 dpi) and will not be acceptable. If using a cellphone, choose high quality settings.
- Any graphics (photographs, charts, tables, or samples of student work) must be submitted in separate attached PDF, TIFF, or JPEG files. Do not embed images into an email.
- Add a parenthetical place marker to your manuscript for images that will be included in the appendix or elsewhere (for example, “see image 3 on p. 16”).
- Image file names should correspond to image place markers in the manuscript (for example, “image 3 student work sample”).
- We need permission to reprint artwork; you need release forms to use images that include people. Photos should illustrate the context, rather than the subject(s) looking posed.

# NYSUT Education & Learning Trust

*The Education & Learning Trust is NYSUT's primary way of delivering professional development to its members. ELT offers courses for undergraduate, graduate and in-service credit, partnership programs that lead to master's degrees and teaching certificates, and seminars as well as professional development programs for teachers and school-related professionals.*

## ■ Courses (45 hours):

Building Positive Connections with Diverse Families and Communities (CURI 6505)  
Culturally Responsive Teaching with Diverse Learners (CURI 6514, UNY 831)  
Cultural Proficiency (UNY 811)  
Multicultural Children's Literature (UNY 820)

## ■ VESi (computer-based training in an online download):

Teaching Diversity: Influences & Issues in the Classroom (EDV 518) - 2 graduate credits  
Teaching Diversity: Influences & Issues in the Classroom (EDV 418) - 2 undergraduate credits

## ■ FOR TEACHERS

*Online Seminars (5 hours):*  
Culturally Responsive Classrooms

### *Site-based Seminars (3 hours):*

Creating a Culturally Responsive Classroom  
Creating Safer Spaces for LGBTQ Students  
The Impact of Culture on Student Achievement  
Inclusive Curriculum: Incorporating LGBTQ Topics into the Classroom  
Working with Economically Disadvantaged Students  
Understanding English Language Learners

## ■ New Member Seminars (2 hours):

Educators Valuing Diversity  
Understanding English Language Learners

## ■ FOR SRPs

*Online Seminars (3 hours):*  
Creating a Welcoming School Environment for English Language Learners  
Our World, Our Students

### Site-based Seminars (3 hours):

Engaging All Students: Focus on Poverty  
Increasing Comprehension of ELLs for SRPs  
Our World, Our Students

## ■ New Member Seminars (2 hours):

Understanding Diversity: How Our Schools Are Changing  
Dignity Act: Training in Harassment, Bullying, Cyberbullying and Discrimination in Schools: Prevention and Intervention (6 hours)  
Sticks and Stones: Understanding Implicit Bias, Micro aggressions and Stereotypes



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