

Bringing it All Together: Classroom Video Study

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Social justice educators concerned with meeting the diverse learning needs of their students center their work around students' identities, histories, literacies and cultural practices. In so doing, they create a classroom environment where every student is seen, heard, and empowered to succeed. They deploy a pedagogy that Geneva Gay, author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, calls "culturally responsive care"; which is defined as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for [students]" (Gay, 2018, p. 36). One way to understand how culturally responsive care lays a foundation for an inclusive and equitable learning environment is to observe a practical example of this pedagogy in action. Edutopia's video, *Bringing Identity Work to Project-Based Learning*, celebrates Miss Hanah Nguyen's fourth grade classroom at Van Ness Elementary in Washington, D.C., providing compelling examples of culturally responsive teaching. The video demonstrates how project-based learning, centered around students' identities and lived experiences, creates an equitable and empowering classroom environment that translates to student achievement.

Rooting projects in work that directly relates to student identity, and leveraging communal engagement, places the students' personal experiences at the center of class work. The work is instantly relevant to students' lives. Just as culturally responsive care places students at the heart of classroom practices, so does project-based learning which is "... really about student-centered practice. For students to be engaged, to be invested, to love what they are doing" (Edutopia, 2022, 0:59). In *Bringing Identity Work to Project-Based Learning*, Miss Nguyen posed this central question, "What is something that we could do as a school family to inspire others?" (Edutopia, 2022, 2:13). In response, students decided to create a mural of a butterfly, with each piece of the butterfly's wing representing core aspects of the students' identities through a poem they wrote about themselves. As one student described the pieces of

the mural, “We can all put our identity in them, and put what we like, what we do, our traditions” (Edutopia, 2022, 2:48). Students were asked to choose words about themselves from the mural poem that they wanted to highlight. Then they shopped for electric parts and built circuits to affix to the mural behind the words they wanted illuminated. As Miss Nguyen put it, “...We found pieces of our identity that we were most proud of, the parts of ourselves that we wanted to share with the world” (Edutopia, 2022, 2:57) and those parts were highlighted by the bulbs in the circuits. One student described the back of the mural versus the front saying, “The back (where it was dark) is like the darkness in life, and we are the light” (Edutopia, 2022, 4:04). It is clear from this response that the project resulted in deep and reflective thought. Not only did students learn about teamwork, poetry, art, and science, they acquired a complex understanding of their value in the world.

In her guiding question, Miss Nguyen set the tone for the communal nature of the project, calling their learning community a “school family”. With this unifying terminology, she set expectations that students would be working and succeeding together. This framing of the project mirrors culturally responsive care in which “Students are held accountable for one another’s learning as well as their own. They are expected to value learning as a communal, reciprocal, interdependent affair” (Gay, 2018, p. 38). Communal learning activities help students leverage each other’s talents for a cooperative outcome. “As a biological species, humans are defined in terms of our cultural participation. We are prepared by both our cultural and biological heritage to use language and other cultural tools and to learn from each other” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 3). When students work together they bring their home language practices, unique experiences, and cultural values together for positive collaboration. Through this collaboration they not only create a collective toolbox to use in their learning, they also participate in a shared experience that makes learning more engaging. This leads to increased motivation; “Students who see a prosocial purpose to a particular academic task are more likely to persist, despite difficulty or boredom” (Cantor et al., 2021, p. 22). Thus, communal learning

helps students develop their interpersonal and collaborative skills while increasing motivation. It helps them develop individual competencies, academically and interpersonally, that will serve them throughout their lives.

Culturally responsive care aims to bring out the best in students, helping them achieve and overcome barriers to learning. As Cynthia Robinson-Rivers points out in *Bringing Identity Work to Project-Based Learning*, teachers who are

building the community of the students together, [are] helping them to be empathetic and compassionate to one another, but also with each individual child. When they have a positive self-identity, when they have confidence, when they have the tenacity and perseverance, they're going to be better contributors to society (Edutopia, 2022, 5:11).

The focus on students becoming *contributors to society* speaks to the ultimate purpose of culturally responsive teaching: to prepare students for life skills beyond curriculum standards.

“Empowerment translates into academic competence, personal confidence, courage, and the will to act” (Gay, 2018, p. 40). In addition to centering student identity, and providing opportunities for students to work in collaboration with their peers, culturally responsive teachers are ultimately concerned with developing students’ “...skills for self-determination in a society that perpetuates institutional racism while proclaiming equity for all” (Gay, 2018, p. 64). By empowering students through identity-centered work, and developing students’ skills of empathy and self-discipline, culturally responsive care equips students with the tools they need to address and overcome systemic injustice and contribute meaningfully to society.

The project work in Miss Nyugen’s classroom, in *Bringing Identity Work to Project-Based Learning*, is an exemplary demonstration of how culturally responsive care leads to adolescent development of students’ sense of identity, language practices, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and academic skills, engendered by educator and student connection. A nurturing warmth is evident in Miss Nyugen’s description of the teacher student relationship:

The root of teaching in itself is relationships, and you create a relationship through the everyday interactions that you have, and the little moments that you build. It's that you know my mom's name, that you know what I did over the weekend, that you know what my hopes and dreams are, that you know that I spend my entire Saturday with my grandparents and taking care of my sister. It's like the little stories that ...build that trust (Edutopia, 2022, 4:41).

While *Bringing Identity Work to Project-Based Learning* highlights a clear focus on positive relationship building, the video does not explain how Miss Nyugen is attending to the diverse learning needs of her students. It is unclear whether accommodations or differentiation is provided to support all students' learning styles and abilities. A culturally responsive and inclusive classroom includes a teacher's understanding of students' learning styles and sociocultural contexts (Gay, 2018, p. 81). In order for students with diverse learning needs or dis/abilities to work equitably alongside their peers, teachers must provide an environment that is conducive to their learning by understanding the contexts of their learning needs. According to the "least restrictive environment principle", "students with disabilities should receive the individualized support they need to be able to learn alongside their peers in the general education classroom" (Talusán, 2022, p. 104). However, it is not enough to simply place all students together in a room and expect them to work within one homogeneous learning environment. An accessible learning environment must exist for all students, and supports must include built environment considerations, scaffolding of curriculum, and accessibility of other school services and programs to meet the unique needs of each individual student (Baglieri, 2022, p. 4). Thus, teachers using culturally responsive care practices must place students in differentiated learning environments, alongside their peers, to ensure every student is able to do their best work. "Inclusive teaching is an embrace of difference that recognizes young people as beings whose identities, needs, and competencies are individually unique, yet always interwoven with varied memberships and histories held within their bodies, languages, and cultures"

(Baglieri, 2022, 14). In order to meet students' needs, therefore, it's critical for teachers to recognize and leverage students' unique ways of knowing and doing.

Bringing Identity Work to Project-Based Learning illustrates the importance of centering classwork on students' identities and lived experiences. An important aspect of this work is tapping into students' funds of knowledge, the ways of knowing and cultural practices of students' families and communities. "By exploring their students' family and community practices, teachers can become learners when they reach out to families and communities to understand students' existing knowledge repertoires" (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018, p. 107).

Bringing Identity Work to Project-Based Learning does not show the ways that Miss Nyugen may be working with students' families and cultural communities to advance student learning, yet this is an important part of culturally responsive care. In order to build upon the knowledge and prior experiences students bring to the classroom, it's imperative to understand the context of their knowledge and experiences. This approach establishes partnerships between schools, students' families and cultural communities. Furthermore, this mutual and meaningful relationship building results in students' greater academic success.

Schools, like Van Ness Elementary, that form bonds between educators and students' families and cultural communities see a range of improvements in students' learning experiences. "Research has shown that parents' engagement in their sons' and daughters' education leads to better attendance, higher achievement, improved attitudes about learning and higher graduation rates"; and studies further indicate that "...children from minoritized and low-income families gain the most from parent engagement" (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018, p. 106). In *Bringing Identity Work to Project-Based Learning*, the success of empowering students is evident. Van Ness Elementary "Outperformed all but one other Title I school in Washington, D.C. when third graders took the state test for the first time in 2019", garnered exceedingly high levels of student and parent satisfaction (as shown in the results of a Washington, D.C. public school distributed survey), and developed a model of teaching that was adopted by schools in

four other states (Edutopia, 2022, 5:43). The example that Van Ness Elementary provides is a resounding confirmation that culturally responsive care improves the learning experience for all students by centering and empowering students in the learning process.

Therefore, culturally responsive care provides an inclusive and equitable model to ensure the success of students from all backgrounds by giving educators a framework to acquire a deep understanding of their students' cultural contexts and diverse learning needs. *Bringing Identity Work to Project-Based Learning* illustrates how to put culturally responsive care into practice by centering students' identities, lived experiences, and cultural knowledge; fostering positive peer collaboration; and developing warm and nurturing teacher student relationships. Teachers like Miss Nyugen create classroom environments that enrich students academically, interpersonally, and intrapersonally, teaching life skills that will extend beyond the classroom and lead to students becoming meaningful contributors to society. To achieve the aims of culturally responsive care, teachers must develop an understanding of students' diverse learning needs and abilities. They must create an educational environment that is differentiated through scaffolding, accommodations, and accessibility supports to ensure that each individual student's unique learning needs and cultural contexts are honored. This is best achieved through authentic partnerships with students' families and cultural communities, leveraging funds of knowledge to uplift students' unique ways of knowing and doing. Project-based learning, like the examples provided in *Bringing Identity Work to Project-Based Learning*, provides ample opportunity for teachers to apply culturally responsive care practices. Project-based learning centers students' ways of knowing and doing, while fostering collaborative learning environments, and allowing educators to build-in differentiated support to bolster learning experiences. Compelling proof of these methods are evident in research indicating that culturally responsive care translates to higher student performance, improved attendance, higher rates of graduation, and increased student and parent satisfaction with educational systems. Conclusively, culturally responsive care ensures every student is seen, heard, and

empowered to succeed, by recognizing and honoring every student's unique ways of doing and knowing, fostering collaboration between peers, and partnering with students' families and cultural communities. It is evident that culturally responsive care paves the way for educators to create inclusive and equitable classroom learning environments that celebrate and support every student.

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