

## Towards a Framework for Culturally Responsive Educational Leadership

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**Abstract.** In this paper the author makes a case for an innovative and dynamic model for Culturally Responsive Educational Leadership. The paper starts by giving a socio-pedagogical account of Culturally Responsive Educational literature and the effect it had on emerging pedagogical practices. Misconceptions surrounding culturally responsive philosophies and their effects on current educational leadership practices are discussed. The need for effective and transformational leadership is highlighted as an essential vehicle to promote transformational change in the reflexive processes needed to engage in new forms of teacher-student interaction with the participation of all stakeholders. The extensively researched theoretical underpinnings have prompted the author to suggest a model for Culturally Responsive Educational Practices. The model can be used as a guide to stimulate further thinking processes emanating from new and productive societal interactions. Such processes may then be used to inform newly constructed Culturally Responsive Leadership practices.

**Keywords:** Culturally Responsive Pedagogy; Culturally Responsive Education; Culturally Relevant Leadership model.

### Introduction

Culturally responsive educational leadership is a construct which emanates from pedagogies which actively respond to the diversity in our school populations. Gay (2002) defines Culturally Responsive Education as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them”.

International literature has depicted schools as a two faced coin – either grounds for conflict or grounds for hope. On one side, school have been described as a fertile ground for harmony, coexistence and cultural cohesiveness while on the other side, they have been described as an arena for cultural conflict and destruction (eg: Ageng’a & Simatwa, 2011; De Dreu, 1997; Di Paola & Hoy, 2001; Fillipo & De Waal, 2000). This two-pronged conception of the cultural impact on

educational processes has brought little meaningful scholarship towards the necessary change which we need to better our schools.

### **Misconceptions and effects on Educational Leadership**

A number of misconceptions still permeate our understanding of such processes. In particular:

- (i) Schools function as a separate entity from societies. There still exists literature which purports the perception that schools are not influenced or are not able to influence the outside world.
- (ii) The one size fits all philosophy should prevail and that the culture of students has little or no impact on learning.
- (iii) Cultural differences are a threat to school functioning and that teaching and learning should be placed in a monocultural context rather than pushing the notion that different cultures and subcultures may exist moving through different school systems and perceived differently by each and every individual (Bonner, Marbley & Agnello, 2004; Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000).

The three general notions have their own ripple effect on Education Leadership and practice and give way to three general streams of thought. The first suggests that every school should develop its identity culture irrespective of the different cultures residing in it and that all individual entities existing within that culture must accommodate within the prevailing culture. The second is that culture can be thought of shared norms, traditions, beliefs, rituals and others and hence school leadership should concentrate its efforts at work towards the integration of such shared notions in a peaceful and resolute manner. The third is that educational leadership should focus on policies which mitigate against oppressed and marginalised groups.

### **Literature Review**

Cultures can be thought of as shared systems, beliefs, norms and traditions pertaining to a group of people where each group define the boundaries which dictate the extent to which these implicit "rules" are shared. Of course, boundaries vary from culture to culture and from within the same culture – hence the existence of subcultures. It must be stated that these inherent rules are also passed on to other cultures and groups and consequently traditional boundaries become more permeable. Consequently, not only are culturally induced boundaries permeable but also are the values traditionally held within the home and community system of that culture. These, boundaries then evolve into "new" cultural subsystems and are then passed on from one generation to the next developing into new insights, perceptions and experiences. It is an ardent task to try to understand the multitude of experiences which such processes contrive but we can appreciate the differences they create, honour them and share our own experiences and perceptions with

others, fully cognizant of the fact that there is no one real culture but a curious mix of cultures (Bourdieu, 1973, 1986, 1990).

There seems to be a common understanding that cultures belong to either at school or at home rather than a curious mix of both complexities. There exist home cultures, school cultures, work-based cultures, community cultures, national cultures, disability cultures, global cultures and a multitude of others. We all belong to each of these cultures to some extent or another. It is not uncommon for educators to stress the dichotomies between school and home cultures, between national and international identities, between abilities and disabilities and fail to realize that school culture cannot be disconnected from community and global culture. But reinforcing an attitude of disconnectivity educators are reducing students into a single monolithic culture which is neither relevant nor realistic.

Phillips (1993) defines school culture as the “beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that characterize a school in terms of: how people treat and feel about each other, the extent to which people feel included and appreciated, and rituals and traditions reflecting collaboration and collegiality.”

Therefore school culture is composed of both formal and informal elements, written and latent curricula, suggested or explicit teaching policies, school development planning, communication patterns, language styles, building of inter-relationship, discipline, curriculum development, professional development sessions and other matters associated with schooling. Such actions and processes take place during school hours and also outside school hours. Both during and after school hours culture is mediated between students, staff, administration, parents and the whole outside community at large including students’ and teachers’ exchanges, international studies collaboration and policy making.

Many schools fail to recognize culturally mediating factors as a major influence on students’ performance (Heck & Marcoulides 1996; Fullan, 2001). Only in the past 15 years has the impact of culture been studied as an essential ingredient in the formulation of new school reforms (eg: Cullingford and Gunn, 2005; Dale, 2005; Daun, 2002, Eilor et. al. 2003). Researchers in school and classroom culture (eg: Vassallo, 2008) argue in favour of its importance and the necessity to study the impact it has on students’ success. Heckman (1993) argues that school culture exists in the beliefs of teachers, students and school managers. Such beliefs are transformed into meanings which are shaped and reshaped into behaviour and unconsciously dictate how people think, feel and act. For a school culture to be developed it must be fuelled by the joint vision of all stakeholders. Fullan (2001) claims that personal “blindness” prevents school leaders from initiating exploratory processes. As Delpit(1995) puts it

We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what

it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue (1995, p.35).

Such processes would be aimed at developing new transformational approaches and actively engaging all stakeholders into participating dialogues which will challenge long rooted assumptions.

### **Theoretical underpinnings**

A number of researchers has made it their personal mission to address social injustice and inequity in schools (eg: Barry, 2000; Carr, 2001; Chungmei, L. & Orfield, G., 2005, Haycock, K, 2001; Shrivastava & Shrivastava, 2014; Ferreira & Gignoux 2014; Greenstone, 2011; Shoho, Barnett, & Tooms, 2011).

“Oppression,” is a term frequently used when describing situations suggesting inequity between those who have power and those who have not. There is therefore a connection between the oppressors and the oppressed (Marx & Engels, 1964) which also implies a imbalanced relationship favouring those who oppress.

One way of mitigating against oppression is through the use of a transformative curriculum (e.g., Shea et al., 2006, Boske, 2014a, 2014b; Brown, 2004; Marshall & Oliva, 2010). A transformative curriculum therefore calls for a reform in the way school leadership is set to prepare teachers, parents and students to increase critical consciousness (e.g., Brown, 2004, 2006). It also calls for reflection and transformative actions on school leaders proposing such changes (Freire, 1970; Kaak, 2011).

A transformative curriculum would therefore require deeper and more systematic analytical skills strategically targeted to work against domineering school practices (Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Marshall & Oliva, 2010). Hence, the preparation of school managers to embrace transformational curricular practices remains central. School leaders should be trained in building bridges across cultures using the primary senses as the vehicles to achieve the purpose.

A sensory curriculum (e.g., Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Ellsworth, 2005; Erlmann, 2010; Howes, 2005; Menon, 2010; Ranciere, 2010) gives priority to the bridging of curricular experiences through expression of photography, videography, poetry, artistic outputs, musical performances and dance. Sensory curricula express the need to understand who we are in relation to the world (Boske, 2014a; Greene, 2004; Pinar, 1988). Hence, learners need to be provided with opportunities which move beyond their very self, explore imaginative possibilities, construct creative alternatives, and utilize new evolving knowledge to empower themselves and reshape a new encompassing world (Boske, 2014a, 2014b; Greene, 1988; Pinar, 2011). There is a growing need to train school leaders to utilize the senses to become social actors to enact what they learn – negotiate meaning through changing educational contexts, interpersonal interactions with colleagues and students, and social exchange with the wider community. These

broader opportunities have a profound influence on school leaders' management styles, value-based judgements and decision making. Sensory curricula empower school leaders to move the office walls, urging teachers to follow suite and moving away from formal settings onto informal ones.

Beauchum and McCray (2011) are powerful in their assertion that "communicating to students the school's attitudes toward a range of issues and problems, including how the school views them as human beings". This compels us to reflect upon the devastating consequences upon our students if we are not responsive to the issues and problems which are presented to us and which take the form of "Cultural Racism".

By exerting power into our systems of instruction and organisational culture we, as educational leaders are manipulating the cultural dynamics of the classroom. Such dynamics might not all be apt to the cultural composition of the classroom. It therefore transpires that the people exerting most influence on children do not share the same culture as the students they teach. Howard (2006, p.54) captures the essence of this in his book *We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers – multicultural schools* and states that "In this way, the educational process has allowed those in power to selectively control the flow of knowledge and inculcate into young minds only those "truths" that solidify and perpetuate their hegemony". White middle class cultures are overrepresented in schools as is the dominant culture represented in the social media. It must be stated that white teachers fail to perceive "whiteness" as a race and are unaware of the implications that this may hold. As the dominant group, white teachers do not hold perspectives. Instead, they hold "universal truths" and the message they deliver to students of other cultures is that of dominance and authoritativeness. If teachers in our schools are not cognizant of their own culture and the way this impacts on instructional processes, then they cannot be expected to effectively include the various cultures of the students residing in their classes and design and implement a culturally relevant pedagogy which is more apt to the educational needs of the individual students present in their classrooms. For teachers to be trained in a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy they must first be aware of their baseline assumptions that all students belong to the same culture, pertain to the same home environment, exposed to the same curriculum and thought by the same teacher, and therefore should learn what is prescribed by the "authorities" on the subject matter.

But, of course, such argument is mined by a number of potholes. Children do not come to school carrying the same luggage of experiences and cultural dispositions. Their viewpoints are coloured according to the cultural baggage they are carrying in the form of values, norms, behaviour, experiences which characterises their identity. They do not come to school from the same cultures, their experiences are unique as much as their values are. If a teacher is able to use the cultural capital present in his/ her classroom then s/he would be able to discover different "truths" present in his/ her classroom and becomes cognizant of the notion that there is not only one "truth" but a multitude of truths existing concurrently.

The concept of the melting pot being frequently put forward as a metaphor for describing a "heterogenous society becoming increasingly homogenous"

(Wikipedia, 2015) is itself a celebration of the whole “pot” rather than the ingredients composing that “pot”. Hence it is arguable whether the melting pot metaphor can be conveniently used to in the classroom situation. Deriving from our own experiences, what truly happens in our classrooms is that students engage in an inner struggle to concede fragments of their culture in an attempt to negotiate acceptance from their peers in return – a process which Herbst (1997) in his study on cultural discrimination in North America calls “Deculturalisation”.

Banks (2012) states that deculturalisation is the destruction of the culture of a dominant group and its replacement by the dominant group. For school leaders and managers an understanding of deculturalisation assumes vital importance in school development planning. Primarily, curricula have been set in ways which promulgate sets of values and norms over others, transforming themselves into effective vehicles for deculturalisation processes and be able to devise effective strategies which prevents the dismantling of minority cultures at the expense of the dominant culture.

Drawing from sociological theory (Eg: Bourdieu, 1984; Bernstein, 2002), Spring, 2009 is adamant on the process of deculturalization and insists that schools have to some extent or another committed cultural crimes in the interest of assimilation and integration.

Spring (2009) distinguishes between the terms cultural genocide and deculturalization. While cultural genocide is an attempt to destroy culture, deculturalisation moves a step forward and attempts to replace minority culture with the dominant culture. For (Spring 2009, p.9) assimilation is merely an attempt to “absorb and integrate cultures into the dominant culture”, which actually means that the minority must succumb to the dominant culture. Schechter & Bayley, (2002) exemplify Spring’s (2009) explanation of assimilation by citing the example of Spanish speaking students being urged to adapt to English Language, the final result being that students are in a continuous “comparative exercise” of comparing their home cultures with the school or classroom cultures, with the classroom culture taking the lead in the whole process. Although school do foster a culture of pluralistic values, there seems to be little or no effective results in students maintaining their own language, traditions and cultural artifacts. This is further amplified and promulgated by catch words as *For all children to succeed, No child left behind, Building the future together* and *Towards a curricular strategy for all*, - notably implying that everybody can learn within the framework as “experts” dictate.

Schools have themselves a dichotomous paradigm of two cultures, the school culture and the home culture of which both are surreal in their existence. Through this process of dichotomising school-home culture, students feel compelled to surrender their own culture to the dominant school culture, eventually silencing themselves to hear the deafening voice of the loud culture.

There are certainly more apt ways which school leaders can develop to celebrate the culture of students residing in their school. School should embrace policies which encompass all cultures in their schools, and build schooling around the complex and multifaceted nature of students and their culture taking into account all incoming cultures modifying formal and informal learning to suit the

cultural composition in their schools and classrooms. This would, in turn, transform itself in an environment which is truly accepting, safe conducive to emotional stability, reduces levels of stress and points to higher quality learning, in other words, a culturally responsive pedagogy.

This would allow students the flexibility to learn in the way that suits them most, from their own vantage point thus influencing stakeholders to engage in critical reflexive processes aimed at reshaping policies and pedagogic repertoires.

### **Basic Tenants of a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is not based on pure academics. Instead it relies on formal, informal and non-formal education. It celebrates all kinds of success. Banks and Banks (1995, p.160) explain that “despite the current social inequalities and hostile classroom environments students must develop their academic skills. The way these skills are developed may vary but all students need literacy, numeracy, technological, social and political skills’. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy advocated for the use of academic skills both outside and inside the classroom and extends success to include vaster conceptual understanding of what is termed to be “successful” i.e. social, emotional, economic, political, humanitarian and others without disregarding the importance of reading, writing and arithmetic as essential prerequisites for academic and social functions. This is what Freire (1970, 1973) calls critical consciousness.

A culturally relevant pedagogy advocates for acculturation – a process by means the dominant and minority cultures construct a new vibrant reality (Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 1992) rather than one culture being subservient to another or absorbed into a greater encompassing culture.

By means of successive acculturation processes, culturally responsive educators and their students build positive, constructive, trustful, knowledge based interaction rather than imbalanced unhealthy relationships paving the way for tensions and radical practices.

CRP pushes forward a critical reflective processes delving interchangeably between the self and the other within a context of a peaceful educational journey for both teachers and students. Culturally relevant pedagogy urges a line of thought where both teachers and students are active actors in an evolving drama, construct a pedagogy where they become masters of their own culture, and subservient only to the new scaffolded pedagogy as a result of their interaction. This interaction is transactional in nature since it leads to heightened awareness of each other’s culture, maximising the learning opportunities of both teacher and students. Together the whole concept of education is reconstructed paving the way for multifaceted ways in which the actors involved can teach and learn.

CRP then becomes a tool where barriers are dismantled and new cultural values are reconstructed based on what teachers and students learn and teach. CRP therefore works at deconstructing hidden curricula and rebuilding new concrete ones.

## A Culturally Responsive Educational Leadership Model

Teachers and students enter the classroom with a number of preconceptions, predispositions and biases into the teaching and learning processes so each and every member within the classroom must deliberately engage in an intrinsic effort to deconstruct his/ her prejudices and engage in a collective effort to construct new learning paradigms. To be able to do this, leaders must engage in a process of reflection whereby prejudices, biases, assumptions and preconceptions make space for newly constructed knowledge. Below is a model which attempts to captivate the essence of the underpinnings outlined above.

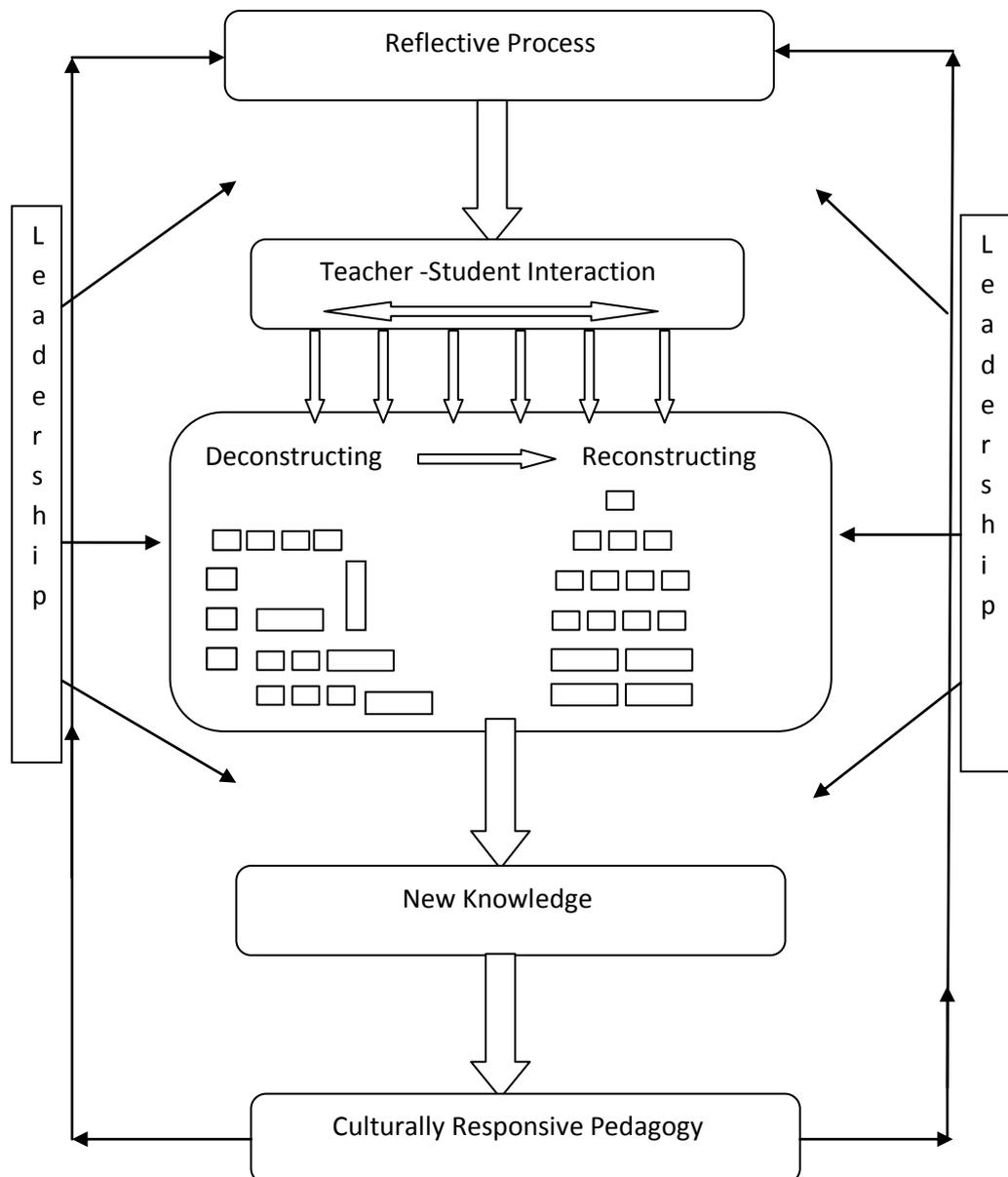


Figure 1: A Culturally Responsive Educational Leadership model

The cyclical process of the model calls for an active engagement from both teachers and students and such mobile engagement should not be limited to the teaching and learning process within the school but goes beyond, permeating school walls and effectively reaching society at large.

Following the reflective stage the actors are now in a position to deconstruct knowledge. This process would involve a critical examination, the extent of which is measured in the light of the cultural relevance of the participants and the curriculum they are supposed to be following. Parts of the curriculum which contain culturally relevant pedagogy should be endorsed by all the stakeholders while elements involving culturally biased assumptions and prejudices are reconstructed in manners which ease transactional learning processes between teachers, students, school administrators, curricular designers and society at large. An effective deconstructive-constructive process will essentially prove its worth when all stakeholders shoulder collective responsibility for the new constructive knowledge driving emergent norms, values and pedagogical processes to unprecedented ethical heights. This would, in turn, culminate in more equitable student learning, greater teacher satisfaction, more involvement from stakeholders with rippled positive effects to the wider society. School leaders need to act as catalysts urging students and teachers to be participative, proactive and initiate parallel processes, thus stimulating culturally relevant pedagogical practices. These processes would then “feedback” new reflective processes along new avenues facilitated by effective leadership. It is the School’s Senior Management Team responsibility to motivate, energise and stimulate processes in the mutual interest of all stakeholders. Thus, a culturally responsive pedagogy would endure that a knowledge base is developed by both students and teachers within and beyond classroom setups and by curricular and pedagogical leaders within and beyond school setups.

This would, in turn, inform and stimulate the wider society who will itself become an active proponent of culturally relevant practice in its multifaceted functions. Curricula would therefore do away with being immovable or serving the needs of those who constructed them rather than those who dwell in them. Curricula are therefore constantly challenged and deliberated destabilized to accommodate each and every participant. Thus there is no single research based practise but rather a plethora of practices, informing pedagogical responsibility of both teacher and student. The long practised didactic relationship (teacher teaching directly to the student) would become less relevant, making space for the continuous evolution of constructed knowledge and mutual exchange of experiences. Curricular leaders must therefore build leadership, curriculum and instruction on the “cultural baggage” which themselves and the students build.

A Culturally Responsive Pedagogy brings to the surface what is already present in a meaningful and progressive manner, dismantling traditional “walls” between teachers and students – permitting the space for students to teach and teachers to learn.

## Conclusion

School leadership is in a constant change of flux. The more the presence of “other” cultures in our schools prevail, the more urgent is the need for culturally responsive leadership. There is an unprecedented need to cultivate the fertile ground which will embrace all students and educators irrespective of their cultural or linguistic background. This presents a challenge for school leaders to immerse themselves into what actually constitutes an effective culturally responsive leadership.

It is hoped that the model presented above (figure 1) would serve as a trigger to stimulate a public discussion on the necessity of raising awareness among educational stakeholders to engage themselves in deliberate thinking mechanisms aimed at facilitating culturally responsive leadership. It is a challenge for educational stakeholders to continue proposing different frameworks (or a refinement of this framework) aimed at increasing cultural responsiveness. School leaders are in an enviable position to lead critically responsive teams for such models to effectively come to life. Effective leaders can use the model to further involve parents into school activities urging them to contribute from their own cultural capital. This contribution will then form the basis for new knowledge to be negotiated among all stakeholders, further informing leadership processes. This would enable the wider community to be more equipped to embrace the contribution that each culture and each individual has towards a more just and peaceful society.

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