CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION IN THE CLASSROOM

An Equity Framework for Pedagogy

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ROUTLEDGE

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PLANNING WITH EQUITY IN MIND

Planning with a Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) mindset draws on relationships with students as well as their unique identities in order to engineer moments of authentic rigor and engagement. Over time and through reflection, I've identified five guiding questions that, when centered in planning spaces, contribute to learning experiences that facilitate meaningful investments for students – behaviorally, affectively, and cognitively.

Finding the Joey

Our question was direct and yet, immensely challenging. We had been thinking carefully about rigor, and specifically we wanted to know what rigor looks like for our 3- and 4-year-old pre-school kiddos. In preparing students for Kindergarten and the primary grades, we wanted to develop the basics of literacy and numeracy, but we also wanted to build their stamina for rich thinking and problem-solving. We spent time studying the Karin Hess (Hess, Carlock, Jones, & Walkup, 2009b) Cognitive Rigor Matrix (CRM) and clarifying our shared understandings of what rigor entails for students and requires for us as the designers of their learning experiences. But the CRM felt difficult to access in this pre-school space. We needed to figure out a way to make it more inherently operational.

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Many teachers, myself included, were indoctrinated socially and professionally to believe that our minds essentially have two dimensions: a rational brain-based dimension and an emotional body-based (or heart-based) dimension (Nielson, Zielinski, Ferguson, Lainhart, & Anderson, 2013). We were further taught that the rational is somehow a regulator of the emotional (at least in the case of the most self-controlled persons), and the emotional functions of the body were somehow subservient to the rational functions of the brain (Immordino-Yang & Fischer, 2009; Barrett, 2017a). This is, scientifically speaking, inaccurate. In fact, it isn't even accurate, in the scientific sense, to say the body and brain are operating on different planes – with the body coordinating our physical and emotional being while the brain manages our thinking. In fact, the body and the brain are in a constant state of co-regulation (Barrett, 2017a). Your mood, for example, is determined by both your body *and* brain. Your body sends signals to your brain that are processed through cognition to create a perception of mood. Similarly, what you experience as pain is not determined by your body alone. That too is a function of a co-regulated process. There is no single thought or awareness that is ever solely a function of either the brain or the body in isolation of the other. Our thoughts and emotions are always developed within a web of social context, cognitive activity, and biological interoceptions (Barrett & Simmons, 2015; Baer, 2017).

The question, *What do I want students to feel?* guides us to better discern how learning experiences can leverage our students' full humanity. When students are affectively engaged in their learning, they are much more likely to find the conceptual connections that are most meaningful for them. The emotional investment in their learning makes it more likely that they will be able to bridge, combine, and recombine the ideas in ways that best align with their conceptual schema. Further, students who are emotionally engaged are more likely to feel the reward of learning in ways that incline them to stay engaged. To feel rewarded for an investment – an investment that isn't initially guaranteed to yield a specific return, no less – is a critical aspect of participation in any endeavor. When students are affectively engaged, they are more likely to trust the people and spaces in which others also are likewise invested. Those spaces becomes authentic learning communities for them.

Asking the question, "What do I want students to feel?" in my planning has better allowed for the intentional engineering of affect that yields the richest and most productive engagement for my students, but it also makes me better attuned to the emotional economy of the classroom. By giving forethought to how I want my students to feel, I am better able to recognize during instruction when my students are owning their learning in the most profound and appropriate ways. In my own teaching, I have come to recognize that the knowing of when to release control is a critical aspect of my effectiveness. The shift in the onus of responsibility for the ownership of the learning isn't solely a function of my students' content understanding. It is often wise to relinquish control before my students understand the content and concepts we are learning if they are demonstrating the kind of emotional investment that I feel confident will sustain their work through their evolving interpretations. In fact, I know many students who have learned to minimize the risk in their cognitive engagement by relying on their teachers to over-manage the emotional

investment for students. I would much rather design a learning experience that compels their affective investment than maintains their dependence on the teacher's.

The asking of this question in the design of units and lessons requires us to recognize our students' humanity, particularly as social and cultural beings who bring a wealth of experiences and understandings with them to the classroom – even if these differ culturally and qualitatively from our own. Though the anticipation of what our students will feel is inexact, we should make an effort to place ourselves in their skin and imagine their affect without rejecting their values or projecting our own onto them. We must also remember that emotion is not a single instance – meaning there are many ways to experience happiness or sadness or excitement or concern (just to name a few emotions). Emotion is a population of instances so the question, *What do I want students to feel?* compels us to consider our students in more dynamic and multidimensional contexts than we might otherwise. I think of this as the height of emotional intelligence in teaching.

When asking this question in my planning, I think deliberately about the emotional journey on which the learning experience takes students (which is why I find the unit, and not the individual lesson, to be the most effective level at which to plan). The richer the emotional environment and the greater the sense of emotional agency for students, the more likely that students will be able to make conceptual connections. In general, I always want my students to feel inspired and empowered, but sometimes I bring them through a bit of frustration or confusion along the way in order to enhance their sense of purpose. In the final analysis, the most useful emotions for a student to feel depend on the targets of the instruction. We as teachers must ask ourselves, *What are the goals for the learning experience and what affects will most powerfully support them?* As human beings, we are more likely to feel like our needs are being met when we experience some kind of positive affect. When students feel as though they have the tools and support to be successful, their feelings will be a contributing factor to their successful learning. Relatedly, when I am working with students to improve their engagement, after a successful learning experience (and sometimes during), I like to consider with them what the success felt/feels like. I want them to understand their emotional agency in engineering their own engagement. In many cases, my more vulnerable students will lack the language to describe the feeling though they know it to be positive. My work in those moments, giving them the language and tools to be able to describe with greater specificity their feelings and the emotional ownership they felt of their success, can be identity-shifting for students. After all, how can anyone justify the risk of investing themselves in a space in which they regularly feel as though they are not in control of their emotional well-being? This planning question encourages a more deliberate co-construction of a social and emotional environment that benefits a palpable sense of classroom community. You, the teacher, contribute to the co-regulation of the emotional economy. Thus, in very real ways, your students' emotions are impacted by your own.

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Now let's imagine that we are teachers planning a unit or single lesson that is intended to teach us this very understanding. The CRE planning questions could support a lot of the most powerful connections we retain from the experience. Let's spell it out just a bit. As we discussed in Chapter 1, your understandings and mine are conceptual in nature – either in the objective, descriptive sense, meaning we use the concepts to define something perceptually, or in the goal-focused sense, meaning we understand the concepts in terms of accomplishing some goal (Barrett, 2017a). Our understandings have emotional anchors. We remember what we were feeling when we learned it, and sometimes, those feelings even come back to us when we retrieve the understanding. These understandings are rigorously developed. We've learned how to extend these understandings beyond our recall and working memory. We were engaged behaviorally, affectively, and cognitively as our understandings took form. We were not merely passive participants in the learning process. And finally, there was an element of responsiveness in the learning experience for us personally. Some part of our identity was leveraged and it bridged into other parts of our identities. The experience may have given us a further sense of belonging in some local or discipline-specific community so that a part of ourselves is birthed in these moments.

You can't reduce a complex and large-scale issue such as Equity to any one single variable, but I firmly believe that planning is a high-leverage behavior that can directly and indirectly address much of what contributes to the opportunity gaps in American public education. The five CRE planning questions allow us to get inside of the concepts we want to teach with greater focus and clearer intentions in order for us to facilitate more powerful understandings. When we plan with these questions – with our CRE lens – planning for understandings that entail the deliberate attention to both the skill- and content-based understandings we want for students and also the affective context in which they learn, we are more likely to develop lessons that honor the full humanity of our students in ways that invite their identities and cultural fluencies to the table. This, again, is what I mean by teaching our students in ways in which they can be successful not in spite of their cultural identities and backgrounds, but precisely because of them.

Equity work requires more elegant conventions for planning. You have to see design as something deeper and more profound than mere *lesson planning*. A vibrant and visceral experience is more likely to engage *all* of your students. You must have good habits for planning if you want to regularly design learning experiences that work for *all* of your students. We have to think boldly in our planning to close Equity gaps. A more integrated and seamless perspective allows us to better facilitate an overall dynamic conducive to the richest learning experiences possible. Regularly reminding ourselves of the overall purpose of our work allows us to *see better* the opportunities for responsiveness. Just like the themes, these planning questions should be thought of as a synergetic whole. These questions, taken together, (re-)introduce a perspective in our planning spaces that can further develop habits and behaviors that close Equity gaps by giving *all* of our kiddos meaningful opportunities to bring vital parts of themselves into the learning experiences where they are actively constructing their academic identities.