

## Connecting to the Cultural Wealth of Students

Ana I. Berdecia, M.Ed. & Certified Coach, Director of the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children, John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research, Division of Transformational Learning and External Affairs, Kean University. [aberdeci@kean.edu](mailto:aberdeci@kean.edu)

### Abstract

The demographics in schools are changing and becoming increasingly more diverse. This fact makes it necessary for teachers to shift from solely academics to an infusion of culturally responsive practices that honor the cultural wealth that students bring to the learning table and use it as a springboard for curricula. This paper will share the findings of a 16-year evidence-based program that couples professional development with coaching. Teachers receive 21 hours of professional development in culturally responsive practices and nine months of mentoring. The program focused on three domains: Classroom design, teachers' dispositions, and instructional practices that help teachers become more culturally and linguistically responsive to their students. Ultimately, the program creates awareness, confronts bias, and provides strategies to link academic rigor with cultural narratives and artifacts that adopt a stance that diversity is an essential educational ethos. Historically, educational materials and curriculums highlight the accomplishment of one particular group, but it is far better to include other groups' histories so we do not overlook their contributions. Some teachers do not know how to incorporate students' cultural wealth into the curriculum and daily interactions. Teachers need support in becoming culturally conscious and responsive to multilingual learners. In addition, students need models of acceptance, respect for differences, and appreciation for the stories and lived experiences of others. The New Jersey cultural program helps to improve the learning environment using a cultural and linguistic lens.

This paper summarizes the impact of sixteen years of working with educators in culturally responsive practices in the state of New Jersey, United States. The purpose of this qualitative and quantitative research is to study teachers' experiences in professional development coupled with intensive coaching to measure the shift and the evolution of teachers' becoming more culturally conscious and responsive to diverse students. Our two research questions are 1) Can professional development linked to intensive coaching change how teachers think about using culture and language in the classroom? and 2) Can the adoption of 26 evidenced-based strategies transform teachers' practices and interactions with diverse students to honor their cultural wealth? We define "cultural wealth" as the values that families hold sacred as they come to a new country, such as language, traditions, rituals, artifacts, and cultural nuances that are shared among their family and cultural group. It is valuing what all students and families bring to the learning table that become tools for teachers as they interact and provide instruction to diverse students whose first language is not English.

Teachers are challenged to implement anchor standards found in the New Jersey Teacher Professional Standards 6.A:9-3.3 (May 2014) and the New Jersey Student Learning Standards Guidance (May 2016). These standards include helping culturally diverse students acquire academic English and implementing culturally relevant practices in the classroom to help students be successful in proceeding grades and assessments. The process of English acquisition is complex and may vary from student to student. Research shows "English language learners are quite capable of learning various classroom subjects in two languages. In fact, they may benefit cognitively from learning more than one language. Transitioning from their first language to English before they have a firm grasp of their first language, usually by the end of third grade, may be detrimental in the long run. Students are taught in English-only classrooms or transitioned to English instructions before they demonstrated well-established oral language abilities in their own language frequently never achieved high levels of English fluency and do not fare as well as those who had an opportunity to learn in two languages" (Espinosa, 2008 p.2). Therefore, it is important that teachers use students' home languages as a springboard to learn English. There are many factors to consider in understanding how children become fluent in English, such as "the language spoken at home, the socioeconomic circumstances of the family, the age of the child, and extend of exposure to English, fluency in the home language, the family's immigration to the United States and the values and customs of the family" (Espinosa, 2008 p.2).

Another challenge for teachers is how to infuse cultural nuances from the student's heritages into the curricula so it can support English acquisition, the preservation of the home language, and strong cultural identity. Geneva Gay, a leading professor and researcher in the culture, ethnicity, and educational space from the University of Washington, Seattle, wrote in an article "*Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching*" (2002) that "culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. It is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly" (p. 106).

Learning a new culture and language can increase stress for newcomer students. In daily interactions with peers and teachers, students receive messages about which characteristics of their culture and language are valued and encouraged in a particular context and situation and which are not. Even if we are unaware of our preconceived ideas and bias, we reflect them as we relate to the students in our care. "As a consequence, these ideas and biases may negatively influence our relationship with particular families and moreover, have a negative impact on students' identity and self-esteem. Similarly, if the classroom environment does not incorporate cultural elements other than those related to mainstream culture, the message for culturally diverse students is that their cultural heritage is not valued" (Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak, 2011). In the words of Dr. Violet J. Harris, "I don't want to push some groups to the forefront and push other groups to the back because then we overlook the contributions and

pioneering work of those groups...” Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop adds, “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the book they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative or positive, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part (Parker, 2003).” Students need models of acceptance, respect for differences, and appreciation for the stories and lived experiences of others.

The New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Institute Mentoring Program was established in 2007 as the only program of its kind in New Jersey that links professional development focused on culture and language followed by intensive mentoring/coaching cycles that support how teachers create and sustain positive interactions with diverse students and their families. Moreover, educators become culturally conscious and responsive. The program aimed to offer teachers a cultural experience that raises awareness, empathy, and knowledge about diverse learners that supports social, emotional, physical and cognitive development as well as academic success. The ability to look deeply inside a diverse person's values, language, and sacred traditions through courageous conversations and appreciate their cultural knowledge is the highest level of becoming culturally conscious and responsive to diverse learners. It not a one and done proposition. It requires on-going professional development and reflection.

The program gives teachers a rare opportunity to engage in extensive coursework and professional development, preparing them to work with the increasing proportion of culturally and linguistically diverse students in their classrooms. This teacher intervention began as an early childhood education-focused program and shifted into Pre-K to twelfth grade in its 10<sup>th</sup> year of programming. In New Jersey, one-third of preschool teachers reported they did not have adequate preparation to work with children whose first language was not English. They described lacking coursework in understanding English language learning and second language acquisition. This coursework was seen as being less applicable to their current classroom content than their coursework on all other topics (Ryan, S., D.J. Ackerman, and H. Song (2005).

Our teacher intervention model includes challenging teachers’ beliefs and dispositions by creating awareness, providing knowledge on cultural competency, and instructional best practices for working with diverse students, particularly those learning English. Teachers are offered an introspective opportunity to be intentional about how they think and what practices they can adopt to engage and create a sense of belonging for diverse students and their families. Cultural coaches partner with teachers to assist them in changing their thinking and implementing culturally responsive practices in the classroom, in real time with students.

The program model is grounded in the principles of action research believing that teachers are equal partners with the cultural coach in their learning and the architect of their own professional development. An authentic coaching model is at the heart of the program and its results. “Transformational coaching is an approach that helps people become skillful in the art of self-reflection, to question and examine their foundational perspectives, values, and beliefs that influence their actions or habits—the underlying reasons and motivations behind people’s behaviors” (Hines, 2020, p. 20). Our program philosophy believes if we change teachers’ thinking; we can indeed change their instructional practices to teach all students regardless of their cultural background.

## **PROGRAM DESIGN**

Cohorts of 12 to 35 teachers receive 21 hours of professional development in culturally responsive practices and strategies that support English language learners. The cohort number is determined by the district or school that partners with the University. A classroom observation and assessment are conducted before the learning institute as baseline data. In addition, a pre-test using a

Likert scale and open-ended prompts is emailed to the teachers to gauge their prior knowledge. The pre-test is collected before arriving at the learning institute which can be held on the University campus or in the districts' spaces. From day one of the Institute, teachers are assigned a mentor who 1) co-facilitates their learning, 2) provides individual/group coaching, and 3) conducts seven on-site classroom visits. Mentoring is at the heart of the program model and its results. Careful vetting and training of mentors provides an extraordinary team of cultural coaches that come alongside teachers to challenge their thinking and practices. The program mentors make a commitment to continue to study the art of coaching through an annual mentors' retreat, training, peer learning meetings, and reflective practices.

The learning institute utilizes lectures, cultural simulations, cultural literacy moment demonstrations, and powerful reflective pauses for journaling. In addition, individual and group coaching, a cultural literacy practicum, and action planning to return to the classroom are included in the 3-day learning Institute. These essential elements create an invitation for teachers to examine racial equity that begins with "dialogue and moves to passion, practice and persistence" (Singleton, 2015, p. 14-15). These components help us to achieve culturally and linguistically responsive interactions, classrooms, and schools that positively affect the learning of all students. It is valuing what all students and families bring to the learning table, particularly their cultural wealth, as we strengthen our relational wealth. "Culturally responsive teaching is about weaving together rigor and relevance" (Muniz, 2019). Every day we can start to see students for who they truly are as cultural beings capable of high performance by becoming aware and open to listening to the stories of another.

Our goal is to face the reality of diverse students, and create equitable solutions that eliminate barriers to learning, especially for newcomers and English language learners. "Cultural and linguistic responsiveness is a movement focused on quality, equitable and liberating education for all students. It is the *validation* and *affirmation* of the home (indigenous) cultures and home languages for the purposes of *building* and *bridging* the student for success in the culture of academia and mainstream society" (Hollie, 2012).

### **Sample:**

Teachers were recruited by a flyer that was sent to their district administrator with an application. Teachers filled out the three-page application and volunteer to attend a three-day learning institute. This paper will focus on past participants which includes 329 teachers from Pre-Kindergarten to twelfth grade working in general, special education, bilingual, and dual language classrooms within private childcare centers and publicly funded schools. The program has worked with 18 cohorts of teachers ranging in age from 18 years to 50+ years old with education levels from Child Development Associate Credential (9 credits in child development) to Master's degrees. In the first nine years of the program, the focused was on early childhood educators in infant rooms to Pre-Kindergarten. In the tenth year of the program, we enrolled teachers in elementary schools (kindergarten to fifth grades), middle school (sixth to eighth grades), high school teachers (ninth to twelfth grades), as well as other professionals such as school nurses, school counselors, librarians, and master teachers. The participants were predominately female and have one to 25+ years of experience teaching or working in educational settings. The participating teachers were as diverse as the students they taught representing various countries, and cultural backgrounds. Some teachers were bilingual and multilingual, and others were monolingual English-only speakers. Some teachers had no experience working with diverse students and others had some experience particularly those who were endorsed as bilingual or ESL teachers.

### **Data Collection:**

The program collected quantitative and qualitative data utilizing various assessment instruments such as pre-and-post-tests (Likert scale) at the beginning and end of the learning institute, classroom observations before the learning institute, and three-post Institute on-site classroom assessments using the Culture and Language 5-Point Scale and the Stages of Change Scale. After the three-day institute,

teachers received seven on-site classroom visits (four supportive visits, and three post-Institute assessment visits). A final evaluation form was also administered to participants on the last day of the Institute to help us measure the efficacy of the Institute's curriculum and activities. The program has developed its own data collection system that is highly dependent on teachers' reflections and mentors' reports. The instruments used for data collection are described below:

- **Pre-and-Post-Tests (Likert Scale and open prompts):** The pre-test measure participants' prior knowledge using four basic questions: What is cultural consciousness? How does deep culture differ from surface culture? What is cultural pedagogy? What is a courageous conversation about equity? Participants also listed the strategies they were then using in the classroom. The post-test utilized the same questions which were categorized using a rubric for each of the teachers' responses into four knowledge levels: basic, competent, proficient, and advanced.
- **The Culture and Language Assessment 5-Point Scale** was utilized at the four-month, six-month, and nine-month markers to measure what strategies had been adopted. Changes are measured across three competency areas: developmentally appropriate practices, English Language learner strategies, and cultural competency strategies. We evaluate 26 evidence-based practices across three domains: classroom design, teachers' rhythm and temperament, and instructional strategies. This tool was developed by the program director and revised several times as data from mentors had been analyzed (Berdecia, Kosec, 2009, 2011).
- **The Children's Institute Stages of Change Scale** measures teachers' general disposition and readiness for change using five stages: Pre-contemplation (1.0-1.4 points), Contemplation (1.5-2.4 points), Preparation (2.4-3.4 points), Action (3.5-4.4 points), and Maintenance (4.5-5.0 points). Each stage has seven indicators including: intention to change, awareness of a need to change, seeking information, effect on children [students], overcoming obstacles, social support, and professional identity. (Peterson, Baker, & Weber, 2010)
- We also employed what we called **Supportive Visit Narratives with Core Program Strategies Checklist**. This protocol attempted to measure what specific strategies teachers were thinking about implementing and what supports were needed to help them go to the next level using language closely related to the Stages of Change Scale terminology. These narratives also included changes in the classroom design and instructional practices through photo evidence. Photos were placed at the end of the supportive visit narratives in a photo gallery section with captions that showed teachers how they adopted the 26-evidence-based strategies during the visit. After each visit, mentors provided teachers with informal and formal debriefings to encourage further adoption of the program strategies and to affirm the strategies they had already adopted.
- **Monthly Contact Reports-** Between mentoring visits, the cultural coaches tally their touch points with each teacher via emails, face-to-face meetings, mailings, phone calls, and texts. Each year, mentors provided 1,561 to 3,135 touchpoints that further helped teachers think about culture and language in their classrooms and in their instruction.
- **Final Program Evaluation (Likert Scale)** measured which program component had been most effective in changing teachers' thinking and practices.

**Table 1: Program’s 26 Evidence-based Practices Across Three Domains**

Classroom Design	Teachers’ Dispositions (Rhythms and Temperament)	Instructional Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Students Families Pictures/Photos</li> <li>➤ Use of Print in English and Home Languages</li> <li>➤ Multi-cultural Posters/artifacts</li> <li>➤ Multicultural materials added to learning Centers.</li> <li>➤ Materials/Supplies that celebrate diversity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Discipline strategies that bridge home &amp; school cultures</li> <li>➤ Routines/Transitions that build on the familiar</li> <li>➤ Provides choices to the students</li> <li>➤ Help all students participate regardless of proficiency level</li> <li>➤ Interaction with students includes their cultures and languages</li> <li>➤ Co-teaching and co-decision making.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Start slow with what students know</li> <li>➤ Talking while doing</li> <li>➤ Using props and gestures that double the message</li> <li>➤ Talking about here/now</li> <li>➤ Utilizes one-to-one and small-group instruction</li> <li>➤ Repetition</li> <li>➤ Extending/Expanding across content areas</li> <li>➤ Using songs w/students’ names, music &amp; instruments</li> <li>➤ Utilizes literacy activities such as read-aloud, poems, word wall, etc.</li> <li>➤ Building vocabulary and conversation in English and home languages</li> <li>➤ Use first and second languages for both content and directions</li> <li>➤ Incorporate the student’s culture and language into the daily curriculum and learning experiences</li> <li>➤ Involve parents in a meaningful way (parent questionnaire, volunteer in the classroom, and exchange information)</li> <li>➤ Provide school information in the parents’ preferred language.</li> </ul>

**Findings/Results:**

After this cultural intervention, teachers’ awareness and attitudes (dispositions) shifted to value students' cultural wealth, evidenced by the inclusion of diverse cultural artifacts in the classroom design, rich multicultural literature, music, and cultural nuances from the students’ cultures into their instructional practices and interactions. Greater improvements were observed when teachers committed to putting the 26-evidence-based strategies in practice during the nine-month program cycle. These are a few reflections about the program from four teachers.

- *“Before this program, my classroom was cultureless; now I can’t imagine a day or a lesson without culture in it.”*
- *“Some conversations felt awkward, but we move into being brave to talk about what can be uncomfortable.”*
- *“When I went to the learning institute, I was expecting to learn strategies for bringing awareness of diverse cultures in my classroom. I gained a deeper understanding of the need to intentionally validate and respect the specific cultures represented in my classroom. I saw firsthand an awakening of pride and self-awareness in the richness of the students' cultures.”*
- *After the program, I stood amazed at how the cultural literacy moments changed my teaching. It sparked interest in the students and allowed me to extend learning across the curriculum to math*

*using fractions, music and movement, geography, and social studies. We became world changers in exploring diverse cultures and the lessons each story imparted to the students."*

According to the pre-tests, participants mostly identified their knowledge of the concepts as basic and competent. However, in responding to the post-tests, participants gained more confidence not only in their understanding of the concepts but their ability to create and implement cultural pedagogy in their classrooms. Following completion of the professional development days, teachers listed strategies they were committed to carrying out in the future: providing students with choices, utilizing routines and transitions in lessons, playing multicultural music, using gestures and visuals when giving instructions, conducting read-aloud with props, and including students' home language(s) in classroom visuals and materials. Other strategies teachers hoped to implement were ones focused on interactions and engagement with diverse families, such as: sending families information in the families' preferred home language(s), having students with their families create heritage posters for the classroom, and encouraging parents to come to school events. Not only did their listing of these strategies relating to students' families show a significantly increased knowledge of instructional strategies, but also showed a growth in their confidence in engaging with those families – as seen in post-test statements. Otherwise, post-test ratings results were mostly in the proficient and advanced categories versus basic and competent. This upward trend in the data would also later be reflected in the mentor narratives and program evaluation forms.

These findings demonstrate that although teachers entered the program unaware of how to start, upon completing the program, they developed effective strategies for working with English Language Learners (ELL) and culturally diverse students. We have seen teachers become more culturally and linguistically conscious and responsive through experiencing a shared body of knowledge and applying that knowledge in their classrooms with the support of a cultural coach.

In April 2011, the program model was peer-reviewed by the American Educational Research Association and presented at their Annual 2011 Conference in New Orleans. The peer reviewers commented that the program *"offered a unique style that has the potential to change the way we offer professional development and provides valuable insight to practicing teachers addressing the needs of diverse student populations."* When this New Jersey program began, there was no other program of its kind that coupled professional development with intensive coaching. As we published our findings from year to year, more programs started to add a coaching component to their initiatives, but no one in our state can claim to offer an on-going professional development solely focused on culture and language with a data collection approach that shows the efficacy of our model.

Although the majority of the teachers were committed to testing the strategies in their grade level classroom, some teachers were resistant to trying out the strategies. Little or no change was observed when there was no buy-in from teachers to think about testing or adopting the program strategies. Out of the 26 evidence-based strategies modeled throughout the program, some teachers selected to adopt only six or nine practices. Other teachers adopt thirteen to twenty strategies in their classroom practices. During the assessment visits, mentors scored each program strategy using the Culture and Language 5-Point Scale. All classrooms showed movement on the scale, and as the mean score for each cohort was analyzed, the results showed 65% of the cohorts showed mid-to-high level growth and 35% of the cohorts showed low-level growth in all three domains of the Culture and Language 5-Point Scale from the pre-assessment (See Table 2). There were also classrooms and teachers that scored higher than the mean scores for their cohort, between 1.6 to 3.6 points across the three domains on the 5-point scale.

In 2011, as the program continued to evolve and improve, we added a second measurement tool from the Children's Institute in Rochester, New York, called the *Stages of Change Scale for Early Educators and Care 2.0*. This tool measured the teachers' general dispositions and readiness to change. "Processes of change are cognitive, motivational, self-regulatory, social, and emotional activities that

foster movements through the stages of change. Cultural styles and orientations also influence movement through the stages. Caregivers [teachers] may have strong ties to childrearing beliefs and practices rooted in their cultural, historical, and socio-economic context. In addition, all individuals have preferred styles of thinking, learning, and communicating” (Peterson, Baker & Weber, 2010). See Stages of Change 5-point scale data results below:

The program’s results show that change is possible. But it takes time and perhaps extended time because we are trying to change the way teachers think and, therefore, the way they behave with and for diverse students. It is all independent of the shifts in their beliefs. Teachers who believe students’ cultural wealth should be included in instructional practices and is essential to quality education will adopt the strategies more readily than those who do not believe. When given the time, strategies, and an experienced cultural coach, teachers can make significant notable changes. A paradigm shift must first occur in the teachers’ thinking by identifying blind spots and examining their own dispositions for change. Change is difficult for everyone because we are creatures of habit and are comfortable sticking with what we know best. In the words of the late William Perry, an esteemed professor at Harvard University, “We must pay closer attention to our own powerful inclinations not to change” (Kegan & Laskow-Lahey, 2001).

This can be a hard sell for teachers accustomed to working with a curriculum that comes in a box with a prescribed script and activities. Culturally responsive pedagogy does not come in a box, and the script is based on courageous cultural conversations that are organic and comes from seeing students for who they really are and the cultural wealth they bring to the learning table that becomes a springboard for curricula. A curriculum that values and validates diversity through positive interactions that celebrate the cultural wealth of students in every content area not just social studies and literacy. Teachers become more competent and proficient in their practices by becoming students of their students’ countries of origin, languages, and values and traditions that are embedded in their rich cultures. Research informs us of what is possible and promotes the mindset shifts needed to advance the “learning muscle and academic prowess of our diverse students learning English and those with educational gaps (Hammon, 2020). This is a call to action for teachers to teach and interact with students differently, being intentional about “leveling up cognition” as well as supporting cultural identities while creating a meaningful, culturally responsive learning environment.

### **Conclusion:**

Teaching can be the most demanding profession given the challenges that students bring into the classroom today. Exciting teachers and supporting them to become innovative teachers and cultural ambassadors are what makes the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Institute and Mentoring Program model so unique and effective. We create space to have courageous conversations that lead to greater awareness about implicit bias, racial equity, and culturally responsive practices. We stir educators’ creativity while supporting them to try new strategies to engage and connect with diverse learners using culturally responsive pedagogy. Moreover, we have seen teachers engage parents in new and momentous ways that include mystery reader, parent demonstration of cultural experiences within the classroom, and co-teaching with parents or grandparents. The pride on children’s and parent’s faces as their cultures were being showcased was unforgettable and created meaningful bridges between home and school.

Becoming a culturally conscious and responsive educator is a continuous process that requires self-reflection, imagination, ongoing professional development, and mentoring. Often teachers do not know where to start, but with the help of a thinking partner (cultural coach), they start to change their thinking and practices to honor the cultural wealth of students and create a global community of learners. By the end of the 9-month experiential, cultural program, mentors observed and reported substantial, positive improvements in their mentees’ classroom design, dispositions towards diverse students, and



their instructional practices, evidenced by the mentors' narratives and photo gallery. Our findings do not state that participating teachers have arrived at becoming experts in culturally responsive pedagogy, but they do possess a shared knowledge to see diverse students for who they are that they did not have before our cultural intervention.

The program has highlighted the assets, resources, and strengths that diverse students bring to the learning table. The model has proven that the program strategies are transferable from grade to grade and work in bilingual, dual, general, and special education spaces. The result of reflective practices and newfound creativity has benefited teachers, parents, students, and administrators in becoming more culturally conscious and responsive in their thinking and instructional practices. The most rewarding part of the process is to see classrooms that were once English-only, that lacked cultural items and materials, that did not use culture or language in the curricula, turn around and blossom into enriched cultural and linguistic global communities for all students regardless of their background and home languages. When walls, learning centers, and instruction speak of who is in the classroom, with the buzz of multiple languages, and authentic multicultural artifacts and stories embedded into every content area, this sends a strong message that the cultural wealth of students is valued and validated throughout the learning experience. This is the opportunity and possibilities that lays before us, to create culturally conscious and responsive educators who know how to connect with students to elevate performance and learn academic English to be successful in school and beyond.

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