4 Preparing to Be a Culturally Responsive Practitioner

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

—Marcel Proust

When I dare to be powerful—to use my strength in the service of my vision, it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.

—Audre Lorde, African American Poet

Up to this point our focus has been on understanding culture and brain structures as critical background knowledge. While we are still in the Awareness quadrant of the Ready for Rigor frame, I want to shift from thinking about the physical aspects of the brain and culture to a focus on emotional intelligence and implicit bias.

As I said earlier, culturally responsive teaching isn't a set of engagement strategies you use on students. Instead, think of it as a mindset, a way of looking at the world. Too often, we focus on only doing something to culturally and linguistically diverse students without changing ourselves, especially when our students are dependent learners who are not able to access their full academic potential on their own. Instead, culturally responsive teaching is about being a different type of teacher who is in relationship with students and the content in a different way. We will

look at that new type of student-teacher relationship in the next chapter. In this chapter, we will explore how we can prepare ourselves to show up differently in our relationships with students.

Being responsive to diverse students' needs asks teachers to be mindful and present. That requires reflection. Engaging in reflection helps culturally responsive teachers recognize the beliefs, behaviors, and practices that get in the way of their ability to respond constructively and positively to students. The true power of culturally responsive teaching comes from being comfortable in your own skin because you are not a neutral party in the process. You can never take yourself out of the equation. Instead, you must commit to the journey. This means we each must do the "inside-out" work required: developing the right mindset, engaging in self-reflection, checking our implicit biases, practicing social-emotional awareness, and holding an inquiry stance regarding the impact of our interactions on students.

As a student, I had the privilege of having two highly skilled culturally responsive teachers. One was Mr. Ruane in tenth grade. He was a White teacher who coached football and taught African American literature. What I remember most about him was how comfortable he was talking about issues of race, culture, and society in a room full of African American kids who took his elective class at the height of the Black Power movement. He wasn't scared or overwhelmed by our teenaged outrage at "the Man" and bold self-expression with giant Afros and raised fists. It never seemed to make him nervous. Instead, he was able to harness that energy in service of teaching us analytical literacy skills and the love of poetry as a form of self-expression. In retrospect, I can see how he used the poetry to cultivate our academic mindset. I can still remember the class discussion around Paul Laurence Dunbar's (1997) poem, *We Wear the Mask*, that he offered up as a life compass and opportunity to shape our own identities as learners. Some of my greatest life lessons came from what I learned in his classroom. And it wasn't just his instructional technique. He made me feel seen, heard, and cared for as a learner. I believe Mr. Ruane was able to support us because he was comfortable in his own cultural skin. He didn't try to be hip or "down" with us. Whatever his implicit biases might have been, he managed them internally and didn't allow them to direct how he responded to us.

As we walk through this chapter, I want to offer strategies and tools for preparing yourself to be an emotionally conscious culturally responsive educator. Before you can leverage diversity as an asset in the classroom, you must reflect on the challenges that can interfere with open acceptance of students who are different from you in background, race, class, language, or gender.

UNPACKING OUR IMPLICIT BIAS

The philosopher Lao Tzu said that the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step, and becoming an effective culturally responsive teacher is a long journey. One challenge is learning how to access and shift your implicit biases. As we do, we have to learn to navigate around the lizards in the road. I am not referring to actual lizards but instead to that internal gatekeeper known as our lizard brain that we talked about in Chapter 3. As you begin your own inside-out work in this area, your lizard brain will start to freak out. It's afraid that you will have to talk about sensitive issues such as race, racism, classism, sexism, or any other kind of "-ism." It is afraid that this conversation will make you vulnerable and open to some type of emotional or physical attack. But this fear is not real. It is just your amygdala's ploy to get you to stay in your comfort zone.

Remember, the lizard brain ruled by the amygdala and reticular activating system (RAS), is designed to keep us safe. It thinks that the safest place for us is deep in the center of our comfort zone surrounded by the moat of our unconscious, implicit biases. When we venture too close to the edges of our comfort zone, it sounds an alarm designed to remind us of the dangers that exist outside. Your lizard brain will try a variety of scare tactics. Physically, it will flood your brain with stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline to short circuit your more rationale thought processes as you step outside your comfort zone or it will put you in freeze, fight, or flight mode. It will try to keep you in check with narratives such as "you need to be color-blind, not calling attention to racial, cultural, or language differences" or "we are all the same inside. Skin color doesn't matter anymore." You might experience impatience with the process as your lizard brain tells you, "This isn't for me. I am a person of color so I already know this" or "this is for White folks." It might even tell you lies such as "I don't have a culture so this is just a waste of time," "They are going to call you a racist if you bring this stuff up," or "This is just touchy-feely crap."

Take a step back and recognize what is going on. This is why understanding social neuroscience—how the brain responds and interacts with others—is critical to a culturally responsive practitioner. There is no way to dismantle implicit bias without controlling this first stage of the process. Instead, accept the challenge of venturing into the unknown with an open mind and heart. Our lizard brain doesn't respond to rationality or language. It is wired only for pure emotion and feeling. Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson, author of *Hardwiring Happiness* says that the key strategy to calming the lizard brain is to practice relaxation and mindfulness. So, start a meditation practice, take up yoga, or join a drumming circle. Spend time in nature. Research in neurobiology proves that these techniques

reduce the fight or flight hormones that get released when our brains feel a physical or social threat. This might seem like an odd suggestion in a book about culturally responsive teaching but it is actually in keeping with the cultural practices of collectivist cultures—spending time in nature keeps us grounded and centered during challenging times. It is part of our resilience strategy.

Begin With an Intention

Intention is the starting point for preparing yourself for improving your culturally responsive teaching practice. The act of committing to the process primes your brain and activates your will. The commitment to be an effective educator of culturally diverse dependent learners builds the stamina and courage to persevere when the process gets challenging. To make the path feel less uncharted, find real and virtual mentors who have already walked the path. Find someone of a similar racial, cultural or class background so that you can see how she developed her practice. Read about the journey of White writing teacher and social justice advocate, Linda Christensen, woven throughout her books *Reading, Writing, and Risin' Up* (2000) or *Teaching for Joy and Justice* (2009). Seek out Tim Wise, author of *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (2011) or African American educator, bell hooks (1994) in her collection of essays in *Teaching to Transgress*. Math educator Bob Moses, founder of the Algebra Project, shares some of his journey in *Radical Equations* (2002). Read about the lessons learned from the year-long, cross-cultural teaching inquiry conducted by Jennifer Obidah and Karen Teel in *Because of the Kids: Facing Racial and Cultural Differences in Schools* (2001).

Self-Examination: Making the Familiar Strange

The next stage is to examine your own cultural identify. Culture is like the air we breathe, permeating all we do. And the hardest culture to examine is often our own, because it shapes our actions in ways that seem invisible and normal. What feels "normal," Small (1998) reminds us, is molded by deeply ingrained social habits and ways of valuing and evaluating what we are scarcely aware of. This is what implicit bias is in a nutshell.

Learning about one's own culture—or "making the familiar strange" as anthropologist George Spindler calls it—is far more challenging than learning about the culture of others ("making the strange familiar") (Spindler & Spindler 1982). A critical first step for teachers is to understand how their own cultural values shape their expectations in the classroom—from how they expect children to behave socially, take turns

during discussions, or even pass out classroom materials. A student's different way of being or doing can be perceived as a deviation from the norm and therefore problematic if we don't recognize that it is just different. This might not be an issue in our day-to-day lives, but when we are the authority figure in the classroom, we have the power to penalize those students who seem to be acting in ways that are inconsistent with our cultural view.

Culturally responsive teaching calls for teachers to take the "emotional risk" to examine the deeply held beliefs that influence how they respond to students. This inward reflection means being willing to listen and change in order to respond positively and constructively to the student who may be culturally different in some way. We have to confront our discomfort through self-reflection and analysis of our underlying assumptions in order to become aware of the unconscious biases that influence our teaching.

Here are three internal tasks every teacher has to work through to uncover implicit bias and prepare to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. We will look at each in depth:

1. Identify your cultural frame of reference
2. Widen your cultural aperture
3. Identify your key triggers

Identify Your Cultural Frames of Reference

The first step in making the familiar strange is to take an inquiry stance toward the examination of your cultural identity. We usually ask teachers to investigate aspects of their cultural identity *after* they have encountered cultural conflict in the classroom, which is often too late (Delpit, 1995). In reality, if teachers want to be successful in their work with culturally diverse students, they must first accept and understand themselves as cultural beings (Marshall, 2002). This self-knowledge acts as a set of reference points that shape our mental models about teaching, learning, and dependent learners of color.

Map Your Cultural Reference Points

Create time and space to work your way through aspects of surface, shallow and deep culture for clues about your own culture. Think of it as a treasure hunt or an archeological dig. Set time aside to journal and do inquiry around key questions. Don't try to answer these questions in one sitting. Instead, plan to sit with the questions before trying to answer

them. This gives your brain time to sift through memories. Pull out some old photo albums or diaries as a trigger. If you can, do some interviews about family cultural practices or views.

Think about your surface culture:

- How did your family identify ethnically or racially?
- Where did you live—urban, suburban or rural community?
- What is the story of your family in America? Has your family been here for generations, a few decades or just a few years?
- How would you describe your family's economic status—middle class, upper class, working class, or low income? What did that mean in terms of quality of life?
- Were you the first in your family to attend college? If not, who did—your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents?
- What family folklore or stories did you regularly hear growing up?
- What are some of your family traditions—holidays, foods, or rituals?
- Who were the heroes celebrated in your family and/or community? Why? Who were the antiheroes? Who were the "bad guys"?

Spend some time shifting through your shallow cultural beliefs and experiences with these questions:

- What metaphors, analogies, parables, or "witty" sayings do you remember hearing from parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles?
- What family stories are regularly told or referenced? What message do they communicate about core values?
- Review primary messages from your upbringing: What did your parents, neighbors, and other authority figures tell you respect looked like? Disrespect?
- How were you trained to respond to different emotional displays—crying, anger, and happiness?
- What physical, social, or cultural attributes were praised in your community? Which ones were you taught to avoid?
- How were you expected to interact with authority figures? Was authority of teachers and other elders assumed or did it have to be earned?
- As a child, did you call adults by their first name?
- What got you shunned or shamed in your family?
- What earned you praise as a child?
- Were you allowed to question, or talk back to, adults? Was it okay to call adults by their first name?
- What's your family/community's relationship with time?

Now, do a similar reflection on your deep cultural values related to communication, "doing school," self-motivation, and effort. List those learning behaviors you believe every student should exhibit—talk and discourse patterns, volume of interaction, time on task, collaboration or individual work, seat time versus interaction. Ask yourself how did you come to believe this? What messages did you get about why other racial or ethnic groups succeeded or not? What did your culture teach you about intelligence? Did you grow up believing it was set at birth? Did you believe it was genetic? Did you believe some groups were smarter than others?

As you develop a greater sense of your cultural frames of reference, you should begin to have a clearer picture of your cultural self—what drives you, what shapes your worldview, and what influences your teaching. You will begin to get a glimpse of your implicit biases throughout the process.

Widen Your Interpretation Aperture

We all operate from a set of cultural frames of reference. The challenge is that if we routinely interpret other people's actions solely through our personal cultural frames, we run the risk of misinterpreting their actions or intentions.

When I am talking with teachers about this idea of interpreting other's behavior through our own cultural frame of reference, I use the example of an exchange between an African American student and a White teacher that Lisa Delpit highlights in her seminal piece, "The Silenced Dialogue" (1988). The student was up and out of his seat sharpening his pencil along with other students as the teacher was about to begin the lesson. She got his attention and said, "James, would you like to take your seat?" James said no and continued to sharpen his pencil. The teacher became outraged and sent James to the principal's office for being defiant. James was surprised and didn't understand why he was being sent to the office. When asked what happened, he said the teacher asked him a question and he answered her question.

This exchange highlights classic cross-cultural miscommunication (Dray and Wisneski, 2011). In reality, the teacher was not asking James a question or giving him a choice. Indirect directives are a feature of White middle class cultural communication style. At home and in his community, James recognized someone giving him a directive because it was direct—"James, take your seat, please" rather than posed as a question with choices. The teacher assumed that James knew she was giving him a directive, and he was consciously refusing to obey it. She interpreted his response as evidence of his intention to be defiant and oppositional.

Create Space for Alternative Explanations

Many teachers don't always think about the cultural lens that influences their interpretations of student actions, parent responses, or their own instructional styles. Instead, we fall back on our default programming, which leads often to deficit thinking.

Figure 4.1 What Is the Deficit Thinking Paradigm?

When operating from a deficit thinking paradigm, educators and policymakers believe that culturally and linguistically diverse students fail in school because of their own deficiencies or because their families don't value education, not because of social inequities, unfair school policies, or differential treatment in the classroom. There is an ill-informed belief that a student's failures are attributable to the student's lack of intellectual ability, linguistic inferiority, or family dysfunction. This deficit perspective suggests that efforts to improve academic achievement should be focused on "fixing" students (i.e., improving test-taking skills) rather than shifting the school culture to support intellective capacity building and identity-safe classrooms so that students can access their academic potential. As a result, teachers' deficit-oriented attributions of student performance influence their instructional decision making, resulting in giving students less opportunity for engaging curricula, interesting tasks, and culturally congruent ways of learning.

The solution is to broaden our body of explanations and interpretations of student actions. We usually talk about sharpening our "cultural lens" as culturally responsive teachers. Rather than using the metaphor of a lens, I want to offer the metaphor of an aperture. An aperture is a hole or an opening through which light travels. The word aperture shows up in both optics and photography. Our natural aperture is found in our eyes. The pupil, our eye's aperture, opens and closes to let in more light so that we are able to see more clearly under certain conditions. In photography, the camera's aperture lets in more or less light so that the picture comes out clear and bright enough. In a similar way, we have to let in more alternative explanations for students' learning behaviors and social interactions that look different from our own. Otherwise, we run the risk of misinterpreting students' learning behaviors as intellectual deficits.

So we have to develop a process that allows us to expand our ability to recognize the different ways things are done in other cultures. Cross-cultural communication experts, Gudykunst and Kim (2003) offer a three-part process for widening our interpretative aperture that can serve as an internal protocol—*description, interpretation,* and *evaluation.* Let's

imagine we are watching two fourth-grade Latina girls doing an assignment at their desks, which are organized in quads. You look over and see them talking back and forth, not in loud, disruptive voices, but low murmuring. One of the girls begins to write on her paper. Then they begin talking again. What is going on?

- **Description**—The first step is to simply describe what you see. The girls are talking. Then they are writing and then resume talking. Leave out any interpretation or judgment of the action. Just include observable phenomenon. What did the person say or do? How did the event unfold? Our own implicit biases will want to jump in to interpret or judge the behavior or interaction.
- **Interpretation**—The next step involves interpreting what is going on. To interpret something, you have to give it meaning. So let's go back to our two girls. They are talking and then writing when each is supposed to be doing her own work. You may interpret their talking as cheating. Or you might consider another interpretation of their behavior. You can see it as a culturally-grounded collaborative learning behavior. You see it as instructional conversation that is helping them each process the task and come to their own conclusions. Each interpretation carries with it implications for being or not being culturally responsive.
- **Evaluation**—The last step in the process involves assigning positive or negative significance to the action based on our initial interpretation. If we interpreted their talking and writing as cheating, then we judge them as untrustworthy, not smart because they couldn't do the work on their own, or lazy. Our interaction with those two girls would be negative based on how we chose to interpret and judge their behavior. If we decided to interpret it as collaboration and instructional conversation, we might judge them as resourceful, acting like they belong to a community of learners.

The first part of the process, description, is inherently neutral in terms of meaning. Think of what you would see if a video camera recorded an event or interaction. Usually, given the fast pace of the classroom, as teachers we have a tendency to move quickly through description into interpretation. Even then we usually offer only one interpretation of the student's behavior or motivations and that's often from our own perspective. Most culturally responsive teachers recognize the need to develop their observation skills so they can effectively describe what is happening during an interaction with a student or when watching a scenario play out between students and not jump to conclusions. This allows the time

and space to entertain alternative explanations. Over time, your interpretation aperture expands.

There's a word of caution here. When students are behaving badly, hurting themselves or others, or disrupting the learning environment, we cannot ignore that and chalk it up to "that's how they do it in their culture." Professor and culturally responsive pedagogy expert Sharroky Hollie reminds us that we also have to recognize "situational appropriateness," meaning that a student's actions may represent positive cultural behavior but may not be appropriate for the situation. A student's behavior might not even be acceptable in his own culture. I always check by asking, *"Do you do that in front of your grandmother?"* As our interpretation aperture expands, we can help students consciously select culturally different ways of speaking or interacting that are still appropriate to the situation.

Here are tips to help you use the Mindful Reflection protocol as a reflection tool:

1. ***Spend some time viewing the replay in your mind.*** Try to review what happened without judgment. Describe it almost like stage directions. For example, here's what we see when we review the replay of the interaction with James. James walked to the pencil sharpener. Seven other children were up and out of their seats. The teacher moved to the front of the room. She spoke to two other students before she spoke to James. She asked James a question. James responded to the question in a neutral tone of voice and continued to sharpen his pencil. Once he finished, he turned to return to his seat. As he walked to his seat, the teacher told him to go to the principal's office.

2. ***Make a list of your assumptions, reactions, and interpretations of behaviors as the scenario replays.*** What specific thing did you react to? How did you interpret it? Based on what belief or assumption?

   In the James scenario, the teacher reacted to James' answer to her question. Her assumption was that James knew that even though she was stating her request as a question with choices, she was actually giving him a direct order. She interpreted his answer as being intentionally defiant. She evaluated his behavior as negative.

3. ***Try on alternative explanations.*** Select one or two student reactions or interactions (what he said or did) and try to offer alternative explanations for the student's behavior based on what you are learning about his deep cultural beliefs, norms or practices. In the

James scenario, the teacher might revisit James' response to her directive since that is what she reacted to. She might reflect on what she is learning about cultural communication patterns (part of one's shallow culture). She might start with doing some inquiry around communication styles. In James' home culture, how are directives given? What is considered an appropriate or inappropriate response? These would be the questions she pays attention to as she continues her virtual immersion in James' culture.

4. ***Check your explanations***. Share your alternative explanations with other culturally responsive teachers in your professional learning community or those in your own personal learning circle. Talk with cultural informants who can give you insight into the positive expression of cultural beliefs and norms. James' teacher could write this interaction up as a critical incident and share it with others to get more input and insight.

5. ***Build your cross-cultural background knowledge***. Recognize that understanding alternative explanations for student behavior is an ongoing process. There is no list to study or Wikipedia page to search online. To be a culturally responsive teacher, means committing to being a lifelong learner. Widen your interpretation aperture by exposing yourself to other cultural experiences similar to those of the students you serve so you can experience alternative ways of doing and being.

6. ***Leverage technology and watch positive movies or television series that will allow you to virtually step into another cultural experience***. Ask for recommendations. There are movies, documentaries, and television series about a variety of cultural experiences—racial, geographical, gender, or language. Watch (don't judge) and study communication styles, nonverbal communication cues and gestures, or how core values are expressed in daily life. Begin to see the patterns that cut across the cultural archetypes of individualism and collectivism as explained in Chapter 2, also look for variations within a particular archetype that cut across race and class. For example, both African American and Latino cultures are very communal, but each culture situates individual recognition and standing out differently.

Identify Your Triggers

Communicating across cultures opens up the potential for miscommunication and unintended conflict. When we try to manage and

Figure 4.2 Mindful Reflection Protocol by Dray & Wisneski

Step	
Step 1:	**Explain the attributions that you have about the student.** a. Describe what you and the student said and did. b. How did the student react to your actions or comments? c. Collect notes on multiple days and at different times of the day.
Step 2:	**Write out or reflect on your feelings and thoughts when working with the student. Take into account the potential for misinterpretations resulting from deficit thinking, prejudice, and overgeneralizations.** a. How does this student make you feel? What are your worries or fears? b. What are your assumptions? Why do you find the student problematic? c. Have you evaluated, interpreted, or described the behavior? d. Try to rewrite the examples in descriptive terms.
Step 3:	**Consider alternative explanations by reviewing your documentation and reflections.** a. Review the explanations and reflect on why the student may be doing what he or she does. Look for patterns in your behavior and the student's behavior. b. What are your expectations for the situation? How is the student not meeting your expectations? In what way is the behavior interfering with learning? c. List alternative explanations or interpretations of the student's behavior. d. What external factors and/or personal factors could be influencing the student's behavior? What recent changes have occurred in the student's life, disability, acculturation, and so forth?
Step 4:	**Check your assumptions. Share your reflections with a colleague, parents, and/or community members. Meet with parents to learn more about expected and observed behaviors in the home.** a. Share your list of alternative explanations or interpretations of the student's behavior with a colleague, parents, and/or community members. b. Meet with the family to learn more about their perspective in understanding the behavior. Do they notice the same behavior at home? Do they find it problematic? How do they interact with the student at home? Have there been any major changes or upsets in the home? c. Be open and responsive to the family's ideas and perspectives. Seek to understand rather than to judge.

(Continued)

Figure 4.2 (Continued)

Step 5:	**Make a plan.** a. How will you change or respond differently? b. Brainstorm ideas on how to change the environment, your actions, and/or expectations for this student. c. Experiment with responding differently. Note what happens. Reflect on your feelings as well as the student's response. d. Frequently communicate with the family. Ask whether family members have noticed a difference. What have they been trying that works? e. Consult with colleagues, parents, and/or community members while you experiment to check your assumptions and interpretations.
Step 6:	**Continuously revisit this process to reassess your attributions and your progress with the student.** a. Notice when you are overgeneralizing, attributing behavior within a deficit perspective, or behaving in prejudiced ways toward certain students. b. Remember that this process is a continuous one, so revisit the steps periodically to continue your growth and understanding of students.

Source: B. Dray & D. Wisneski in *Mindful Reflection as a Process for Developing Culturally Responsive Practices.* TEACHING Exceptional Children, Sept-Oct 2011.

navigate across cultural differences, our brain is on the lookout for signs of danger or signs of well-being based on our cultural frames of reference. When we feel a threat of any sort—including threats to our belief systems—we are vulnerable to an amygdala hijack. Remember your RAS acts like the brain's emotional "smoke detector," always scanning for things that might cause social embarrassment or emotional pain when we are communicating cross-culturally, ready to sound the alarm that jolts us into fight and flight mode. *When our brain's alarm system gets triggered, we become culturally reactive in an effort to protect ourself rather than culturally responsive to the other person we are interacting with.*

We all get hijacked at times, but culturally responsive teachers know themselves well enough to anticipate situations that might trigger them. They have tools and techniques to avoid or short-circuit an amygdala overreaction. A key readiness skill or capacity the culturally responsive teacher develops is the ability to manage her emotions and reframe potential threats. To reduce the possibility of getting hijacked, it is important to practice mental strategies and physical tools to prevent or de-escalate the

amygdala's reaction. The culturally responsive teacher's ability to manage her emotions is paramount because she is the "emotional thermostat" of the classroom and can influence students' mood and productivity.

Recognizing Common Triggers

An important part of identifying your triggers is recognizing universal triggers that are hardwired into the brain. The field of social neuroscience has identified some of the high alert categories that have been hardwired into our amygdala. Think of it as preloaded software that every person comes with as a result of human development over time. Research has shown that humans have a fundamental need to belong, are incredibly sensitive to their social context, and are strongly motivated to remain in good standing with their social group to avoid social exclusion (Rock, 2009).

There are five elements of social interaction that activate strong threats and rewards in the brain, thus influencing how we react in given situations: *standing, certainty, connection, control, and equity* (Figure 4.3). They have a strong influence on our implicit bias and cultural frames of reference. Do some reflection and think about which ones trigger you.

Figure 4.3 Social Interaction Elements That Activate Threats in the Brain

Element	Description	What's the Threat
Standing	Standing refers to one's sense of importance relative to others in one's social network or organizational hierarchy (e.g., peers, coworkers, friends, supervisors). It also relates to how one believes others in the group perceive him—negative or positive, competent or incompetent.	The fear that one would be expelled from the "tribe" (such as being fired from a job, evaluated poorly by the principal, ostracized by peers because of doing things differently).
Certainty	Certainty refers to one's need for clarity and predictability in a social situation in order to make accurate social moves. It also relates to one's ability to predict what will happen (e.g., routines, cause and effect, action and reaction).	The fear of possibly embarrassing oneself or being unable to know what to do in a given situation. The feelings of being out of control or unable to be safe because of venturing into the unknown with new teaching practices and unfamiliar ways of organizing the classroom.

(Continued)

Figure 4.3 (Continued)

Element	Description	What's the Threat
Control	Control speaks to one's sense of control over his life and the perception that one's behavior can have a positive effect on the outcome of a situation (e.g., getting a promotion, finding a partner) rather than something out of his control having more influence (e.g., class, race, language, or gender).	The fear of someone telling you what to do, where to go, and how to behave that is inconsistent with your values (such as with English only laws or Jim Crow laws).
Connection	Relatedness focuses on one's sense of connection to and security with another person, one's family, or one's peer group. It also is concerned with whether new people one interacts with are friend or foe.	The fear of being an outsider and excluded. We fear losing important connection with others. People do not want to be out of relationship with others, especially an important peer group.
Equity	Equity refers to having a sense of fair, just and nonbiased exchange between people (e.g., equal opportunity, equivalent pay for equivalent work, the elimination of unearned advantage and disadvantage).	The threat can come when one feels he or his group (class, geographic, linguistic) is being subjected to unearned disadvantage or someone is receiving unearned advantage. It may also be associated with distancing oneself from unearned advantage.

Practicing Emotional Self-Management

Self-management involves being aware of one's feelings and the ability to use this awareness as information to manage and adjust one's emotional state. For a culturally responsive teacher who is working to empower dependent learners who may be resistant out of fear, this practice is critical.

From neuroscience, we know emotions are contagious, so if one person in the classroom gets emotionally hijacked, it's likely others will be infected with anxiety, resistance, or disengagement. So just as we take precautions not to spread physical viruses, we want to avoid spreading toxic emotions that make everyone reactive rather than responsive. Remember that the brain has a **negativity bias**, meaning that the brain is more than 20 times more focused on negative experiences than on positive ones. Think Velcro versus Teflon. There are steps you can take to calm your amygdala.

Identify what sets you off. Think about which of the five areas of social threat make you defensive—class issues, geographic/regional differences, racial differences? Sometimes we know in advance that we're going to be in a conversation or a situation that is likely to set us off. In those cases, it's a good idea to take some time in advance to ask yourself: "What am I trying to do in this situation and how do I need to show up to make that outcome likely? How do I want to respond when that person does something that pushes my anger button?" By thinking it through in advance you're using your prefrontal cortex and are programming it to help keep your amygdala in check.

Label your feelings when they come up. For decades, psychologists, counselors, priests, and educators have been helping people identify or label their feelings. Now we know from new research using functional MRI imaging of the brain that labeling these feelings helps reduce their intensity and return some of the activity back to the prefrontal cortex along with more cognitive control. They call it "affect labeling." This process helps you cognitively reappraise or reframe negative feelings, thereby reducing their impact.

Begin by stating what's happening: If you can either say out loud or to yourself, "I'm getting angry here," you put yourself in the role of observer rather than actor. It is easier to make thoughtful choices about what to do next if you can decouple yourself from being the actor.

Create an "early warning system." Knowing what causes an amygdala hijack can help you head it off. By paying attention to signs and emotions you can take action early rather than allowing the amygdala to completely take over. *Notice your physical reaction.* When threatened or angered, most people have physical cues that they're headed down that path. It could be a tightening of your jaw, a flush feeling in your face, your vocal cords tightening up or something else. If you notice that, it's a cue to step back and regroup.

The S.O.D.A. Strategy

Here S.O.D.A. is not a carbonated drink, but a strategy for gaining control of our emotions when we feel triggered or our buttons have been pushed. S.O.D.A. is an acronym that stands for Stop, Observe, Detach and Awaken. The strategy is based on neuroscience findings that tell us that if we are able to put as little as 10 seconds in-between the time we get triggered and our reaction, we can preempt an amygdala hijack and avoid responding negatively. The following box gives an overview of the S.O.D.A. strategy.

Stop. This first step simply asks you to stop and pause rather than react in habitual ways. When you enter an interaction that feels challenging, work hard to stay open-minded. Open-mindedness means being open to other points of view, other ways of doing things, and staying open to changing your own view point. This might mean not allowing a certain cultural display such as a students' animated verbal exchange trigger you.

Observe. In the second step, check yourself. Don't react to what is going on. Instead, take a breath. Use the 10-second rule. When the brain gets triggered, it takes stress hormones approximately 10 seconds to move through the body to the prefrontal cortex. In the pre-hijack stage, the biochemicals cortisol and adrenaline are just beginning to kick in. There is still some 'wiggle room' to listen to your wiser self and begin using stress management techniques to interrupt the amygdala take over effectively. Try to describe to yourself what is happening in neutral terms. It is during this step that you can recognize that what was originally perceived as a threat isn't really.

Detach. Sometimes when we get triggered, we get personally invested in being right or exercising our power over others. Deliberately shift your consciousness to more pleasant or inspirational images. If those techniques fail, go get a drink of water, literally take a few steps back to shake yourself up a bit. When we can detach from the goal of being right or defending ourselves, we can redirect our energy toward being more responsive rather than reactive.

Awaken. When our amygdala reacts, it's because we are trying to protect ourselves. Shifting focus from yourself to the other person in front of you, helps you "wake up" or become present in the moment. Try to see the other person as someone with his own feelings. He might be scared and reacting out of fear. Ask yourself a few questions about the other person. What are they thinking? How are they feeling in this moment? Shifting over to their perspective will get you out of your own reactive mode and will put you in a better position to have a positive interaction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING DEPENDENT LEARNERS AND BUILDING INTELLECTIVE CAPACITY

In this chapter, we looked at three key areas of prep work to get yourself ready to be a culturally responsive teacher or to take your practice to the next level. Think about how you will organize yourself to move the work forward. Don't be overwhelmed by thinking you have to master each area before you can consider yourself competent. Find one or two high

leverage activities in each area and work on them for a specific time period. Structure life so that you have protected time for the type of internal excavation this requires. For example, use the six-week grading period to focus exclusively on doing inquiry around widening your interpretation of student behaviors. Maybe a few hours every Sunday can be devoted toward the more personal cultural identity work. Find other colleagues for accountability and support.

The old adage we usually hear is that "practice makes perfect." Based on what we know about neuroplasticity and deliberate practice, we should rephrase that to read, "practice makes permanent." As you organize yourself for this self-reflective prep work, remember that it is not about being perfect but about creating new neural pathways that shift your default cultural programming as you grow in awareness and skill.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Culturally responsive teachers have to understand their own cultural reference points to be effective.
- They must practice self-management to maintain their emotional intelligence and grow their cultural I.Q.
- Culturally responsive teachers learn to expand their interpretations of student behavior to include different cultural displays of learning and social interaction.

INVITATION TO INQUIRY

- What are your current cultural frames of reference?
- What processes have you engaged in to examine your own deep culture?
- What student social and learning behaviors trigger you in the classroom?
- What bias or assumptions might be behind your triggers?
- How do you manage your emotional intelligence in cross-cultural interactions?

GOING DEEPER

- *Because of the Kids: Facing Racial and Cultural Differences in Schools* (2001) by Jennifer Obidah and Karen Teel
- *Everyday Anti-Racism: Getting Real About Race in School* (2008) edited by Mica Pollack
- *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School* (2005) by Mica Pollack