



Book Review: Equity Does Not Mean Equal in Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Review

Stembridge, A. (2020). *Culturally responsive education in the classroom: An equity framework for pedagogy*. (1st ed.). Routledge. 224 pp. ISBN 978-1138339453. US \$28.

Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom: An Equity Framework for Pedagogy by Adeyemi Stembridge focuses on equity and how teachers can create a culturally responsive classroom environment that is engaging, student-centered, and inclusive for all students. Adeyemi Stembridge, PhD, is a former 7–11th grade English teacher who currently works as an educational consultant, specializing in equity-focused school improvement. Dr. Stembridge believes that the goal of education is to prepare responsible students to be stewards of democracy while also fairly identifying and positioning youth from all ethnic groups to contribute to society (Stembridge, 2020). However, the author also points out that “equity is not equality” (p. 6). Dr. Stembridge describes throughout the book the many parallels that exist among art and teaching. He shares that both artist and teachers use their skills, imagination, and commitment to create brilliant art and brilliant teaching (Ferlazzo, 2020). This is the underlying theme in the book, that teachers are brilliant and can use their brilliancy to really think about ideas, tasks, and behaviors that can be used to create a Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) for all students.

Dr. Stembridge’s purpose for writing the book is to communicate why CRE is the framework for equity, suggest that equity and pedagogy should be the central focus of schools, and describe specific elements found within CRE. The book continues along the lines of Geneva Gay’s research (2000), which revealed that meeting the needs of culturally different students was best achieved through CRE. The author believes that when all student groups receive opportunities, equity is accomplished resulting in achievement in all student groups (Stembridge, 2000). The book was written for educators, administrators, and pre-service teachers to gain a deeper understanding of how equity is the catalyst for teaching and learning; it also challenges the readers to bring these ideas surrounding equity into their own classrooms.

Note: I would like to acknowledge my family for their enduring support, especially the most supportive man on the planet, Kevin.

The first chapter of Stenbridge's book, "Equity Work Defined," explains that fairness in opportunity is equity. The chapter further explains that closing the equity gap that impedes the perception of learning opportunities for learners can only be achieved through CRE pedagogy, since CRE is the road paved with rigorous and engaging learning opportunities for all. Chapter 1 credits brilliant teachers who constantly reexamine their own metacognition. In doing so, they are often culturally responsive teachers who create like spaces and experiences for each student. Metacognition is connected to CRE. To be a culturally responsive teacher, one must always be thinking and reevaluating CRE. CRE includes reexamining instruction, experiences, books, and tools used within the classroom environment to ensure that they are culturally responsive. The chapter ends with a brief example of how to design interdisciplinary units for richer learning experiences. However, there is not enough detail in the author's description of the personal narrative lesson that would allow the reader to easily replicate the lesson in their own classroom.

Chapter 2, "Theory of Change: Culturally Responsive Education," defines CRE as the mental mode for addressing equity gaps. Responsiveness is discussed and described as the ability of teachers to support students by helping them make connections between their own culture and the content that is taught in school. The author then pays homage to the four founders of CRE: Gloria Ladson-Billings, Lisa Delpit, Geneva Gay, and Sonia Nieto. The purpose of CRE is further defined in the chapter as the mental models that allow teachers to look at the state of the things in and around them in order to create fair equity learning opportunities for all students. The author stresses the importance of centering instruction on creating rich and meaningful understanding. This is achieved by first thinking about what the students need to understand and feel during and at the conclusion of a lesson. The subject of trauma was also introduced and the importance of aiding students in constructing their own social networks to mitigate trauma. Unfortunately, the author only allots one paragraph to the subject and could have further elaborated on ways in which the reader can help facilitate trauma students in building their social network.

"The Six Themes of Culturally Responsive Education," the title of Chapter 3, describes the six themes that teachers can use to respond to behaviors, circumstances, and tasks to ensure that equity is being implemented with integrity in the classroom. The six connected themes are engagement, cultural identity, relationships, vulnerability, assets, and rigor. Engagement is the physical investment that students make in their own learning. Cultural identity is the feeling of belonging to a group. Relationships are the authentic social exchanges that occur between peers and between peers and teachers. Vulnerability is the willingness to engage in the profession of teaching with your whole heart. Assets refers to the ability to recognize and incorporate the assets of your students into the design of your instruction. Finally, rigor focuses on instructing your students with rigorous and interesting lessons. When these six connected themes are woven into a classroom, the CRE will raise the rigor and see increased student engagement. Chapter 3 is the most comprehensive and informative chapter in the book because of the author's vivid description of the six individual themes.

Chapter 4, "Planning with Equity in Mind," centers around the five planning questions teachers must ask themselves when creating and developing rigorous learning experiences that will lead to a high level of student engagement. Question one asks the instructor to focus specifically on what they want the student to learn and to retain years after the lesson has concluded. The second question involves how the teacher wants the students to feel; this is achieved through the planning of engaging lessons. Question three centers around the importance of getting to high levels of rigor as soon as possible during the lesson to hold the attention of all learners. The fourth question stresses the importance of the instructor predetermining what specific indicators of student engagement should be included in the plan. Finally, question five asks the instructors to focus on their most vulnerable students by providing them with opportunities to be responsive to the learning by giving them encouragement and supports. This provides vulnerable learners with needed supports to understand and engage in the content, which provides equity to this specific group of students. The purpose of

the chapter is for CRE to incorporate the five planning questions with the six themes that were previously introduced in Chapter 3.

“Promising Practices” is the title of Chapter 5. It describes in depth the many different tools that teachers can use in their classrooms to promote equity. The first five of the ten strategies presented in the chapter were of primary interest. Productive struggle is the practice of allowing one’s students to exercise their brains in struggling with the problem while the instructor only provides differentiated support as the students work towards their own individual process of understanding. Method acting is another tool that teachers can incorporate as they facilitate writing lessons in their classrooms. Method acting is the process of creatively “showing instead of telling” the reader what is happening through the incorporation of bold and descriptive writing. The students’ process of “showing” involves writing a draft, recording a video, revising their individual writing, and finally incorporating peer revision.

The memes and gifs strategy is the third tool that can be used with middle and high school students. The process begins with students utilizing communication devices to explain their thinking and construct meanings of word definitions by finding gifs or memes that represent the specific words. The philosophical chair strategy is the process of debate that occurs among students through dialogue as they try to persuade their peers to see the argument from their point of view. Inside/outside circle is a nod to Spencer Kagan’s “inside-outside circle” cooperative learning strategy (2009, p. 6.27). This strategy occurs when half of the students stand inside while the other half of the students stand outside of the circle facing each other to communicate and listen while they explain their thoughts to their peers on a specific topic chosen by the instructor. Additional strategies included in this chapter are design challenges, question formulation technique, interview yourself, human barometer, and Socratic seminar. These strategies are great tools and opportunities for most students to engage with the content and their own individual learning. However, the lack of a description as to which accommodations and/or modifications could be used to address the needs of unique populations (i.e. SPED, EL, etc.) is missing from every one of the strategies in the chapter.

The final chapter of the book, “Implications and Next Steps: Where Do We Go from Here?” is best described using the author’s own insightful words:

School is a concept—as is the role of both the teacher and student. We have to evolve our concepts so that educational opportunity is relevant and available to *all*, which means we have to evolve with greater attention to and intention for supporting fairness and Equity...or the great honorable concept of American public school may perish on our watch. (Stembridge, 2020, p. 207)

Dr. Stembridge reminds us that equity can be accomplished in education when instructors think like an artist: aim for brilliance, not mastery; reimagine the assessment paradigm with an equity lens.

Stembridge’s book, *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom*, is a powerful book that allows the reader to implement the concept of equity into pedagogy in the K–12 classroom. Providing the reader with six connected themes that are involved in CRE (engagement, cultural identity, relationships, vulnerability, assets, and rigor) allows the reader to understand and incorporate equity in their own classrooms. The author candidly describes and provides real life examples when he as an instructor successfully used the six themes in his classroom to incorporate equity.

In conclusion, if you are reading *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom: An Equity Framework for Pedagogy* in hopes of discovering a cookbook that will prescribe some ways to create a culturally responsive education overnight this book is not for you. However, this book could be useful for pre-service teachers, practicing teachers, and administrators, because it is not a scripted list of items to include in your everyday lessons. Instead, it provides a different mindset to address equity with ten applicable tools that

teachers can utilize as they plan equity lessons for their classrooms. Currently, educators are looking for ways in which to design and create inclusive classrooms and instruction for their students. Stenbridge's book eloquently accomplishes the task by asking the reader to first look at their own beliefs and mindsets to begin the journey of creating learning opportunities that are grounded in CR teaching and practices for all students in order to close the equity gaps that currently exist.

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