CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEAMING

Composing Cultures of Collaboration in Schools



Adeyemi Stembridge and Lindsey Stevens

An **Eye On Education** Book

ROUTLEDGE

Culturally Responsive Teaming

This book explores a team-based approach to Culturally Responsive Education (CRE)—the collaborative spaces where lessons are planned, and relationships are formed. Drawing from his bestselling *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom*, education expert and coach Adeyemi Stembridge partners with educator Lindsey Stevens to unpack how teams can build the culture to support an environment for culturally responsive teaching practices and policies. Teaming habits can support (or hamper) teachers in developing and delivering culturally responsive strategies that truly work in classrooms, and this book helps educators collaborate on planning for learning experiences, fostering relationships, and understanding cultural identities to create rigorous and inclusive learning experiences for all students. The authors share insights, observations, and practical guidance for how school teams can enhance teaching and learning by composing a common understanding of teaming tasks, building trust, addressing common roadblocks, and holding space for the inelegant questions necessary in the pursuit of Equity.

Adeyemi Stembridge is an educational consultant specializing in Equity-focused technical assistance, and a coach and thought-partner to teachers and administrators with a particular interest in the design of culturally responsive systems and learning experiences for students. He is author of the bestselling *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom: An Equity Framework for Pedagogy* (Routledge, 2020).

Lindsey Stevens is the Executive Director at the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession. She is an experienced educator and leader dedicated to the advancement of teaching excellence and professional development. With over two decades of experience in education, she has held various roles ranging from classroom teaching to executive leadership positions.

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Culturally Responsive Teaming

Composing Cultures of Collaboration in Schools

Adeyemi Stembridge
and Lindsey Stevens

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Meet the Authors

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▶ **Lindsey Stevens** is an experienced educator and leader dedicated to the advancement of teaching excellence and professional development. With over two decades of experience, she has held various roles ranging from classroom teaching to executive leadership positions.

Lindsey began her career as a high school teacher, where she developed not only a passion for fostering learning and growth in students but the learning and growth of herself and other educators as well. Over the years, this commitment to education has led her to take on additional responsibilities such as mentoring new teachers, leading teams, and building professional development, as well as district-wide curriculum development initiatives.

Lindsey currently serves as the Executive Director at the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession. In this role, she spearheads efforts to support and empower teachers statewide, leading initiatives in teacher development, adult learning, and equity-focused education. With a Master of Science degree in Education, National Board Certification, and continued participation in a variety of other professional development opportunities, Lindsey brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to her work in education.

Driven by a deep-seated belief in the transformative power of education, Lindsey continues to make significant contributions to the teaching profession, striving to create inclusive, supportive, and innovative learning environments for educators and students alike.

Preface

Whether or not authors admit it (to ourselves or to others), we make assumptions about you, the reader, and our assumptions play a formative role in how a book is written and what it's written about. So instead of leaving it for your speculation, we want to make our position clear right from the top!

We assume you are competent *because* you make hundreds of professional decisions every day. We assume you care *because* care is what keeps most teachers in classrooms, even with the immense challenges of your work. We assume you know your students *because* proximity creates knowledge no system-wide database can replace.

We're not trying to kiss up or coddle your ego by speaking so highly of you. In fact, these assumptions are also the basis for our lofty expectations. Our confidence and hope are resting on your already heavily burdened shoulders. With this book, we're not trying to teach you how to be competent but rather to build habits in teaming that magnify your abilities.

Teaching in the 21st century is more complex than ever before. It doesn't matter how competent you are; everyone struggles with our craft. So having to work against assumptions of incompetence is yet another complicating factor in an already challenging endeavor. The job of teaching is tough enough, but it's even harder to be innovative and responsive to your students when the system seems to operate as if it lacks faith in your professional judgment.

We also have a responsibility to be aware of our assumptions about others. An important mechanism in your teaming, by the way, is your own willingness to assume the competence of your colleagues. If we can make asset-based assumptions about each other in teaming, we're in a much better position to benefit from everyone's differences.

Where This Work Comes From

This book is born out of a series of professional development for teachers on Culturally Responsive Education (CRE).

Dr Adeyemi Stembridge worked in partnership with a small but mighty education non-profit based in Olympia, WA, the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, or more commonly known as CSTP (pronounced "c-step"). Lindsey Stevens, a veteran teacher of 17 years, was newly appointed to the role of Executive Director and dove into, among other things, the recruitment and support for scheduling and facilitating annually two dozen or so residencies in schools across Washington state.

A Culturally Responsive Education Residency is a three-day, immersive exploration into the intersections of theory and practice to consider what fairness requires in the policies and practices of schools. It's professional development that's grounded in scholarship and the experience of teachers to promote pedagogy that empowers students to draw on their own cultural fluencies for learning.

In addition to the consistently positive reviews of the residencies, Lindsey first noticed how the CRE tools seemed to yield not only dynamic learning experiences for kiddos but also for the teachers. Having had the role of teacher–mentor, formally and informally, it was clear to her that something was happening that served collaboration as well. We saw smiles. We also observed the building of trust—the kind that benefits the process and the resulting products. The teachers worked really hard and spoke of mental fatigue and, in the same breath, talked of feeling inspired.

That being said, this book isn't based on the content of residencies. There we keep a clear focus on classroom pedagogy. Our focus here is on the collaboration of adults. But this isn't a manual. It's not intended to be a how-to guide for teaming. Please try not to think of this book being about planning for *someone else*. We'd rather you read it as a book about how you, *yourself*, can show up for building a teaming culture so that you and your colleagues can collaborate more effectively.

We think that books on collaboration, which come across as procedural and programmatic, also reveal something about the assumptions made of readers. Much of the professional learning offered in systems implies that teachers can't be trusted to think *together* without scripts, worksheets, and a tightly managed process. But teaching isn't a paint-by-numbers project. It's an

artful, interpretive practice that requires dynamic discernment. Even the most thoughtfully designed curriculum created by intelligent, well-intentioned people cannot know your students the way you do. And to that end, even the most thoughtfully designed collaboration tools cannot know you, your colleagues, or your collective passions or the challenges you face, the way that you do. It cannot see what you see, feel what you feel, or be prepared to draw on your humanity to respond to the immediate context of learning as it unfolds.

Too often, systems try to answer the urgency of the moment with a kind of standardizing impulse—as in, the system will make things fair by attempting to make everything the same. To achieve this goal of equality, it requires compliance. But the system doesn't call it that; it asks us instead for fidelity. *Follow the curriculum with fidelity*, says the system, even when fidelity limits the responsiveness that Equity requires. We see the value in curricular resources, but we say *with integrity* is greater than *with fidelity*. Integrity is a commitment to purpose. It's an alignment of values. It's the exercise of our professional judgment to give our students the opportunities they need … because you know one another and your students in ways that the system can't possibly.

Diversity is a defining feature of modern schools. The range of differences we see in students and their backgrounds *is* the justification for a focus on teacher judgment as *the* key resource in 21st-century education. Fidelity won't cut it because the possibilities for how teaching and learning play out in any given classroom far outnumber the artificial scenarios that can be predicted by pacing guides. Without integrity, teaching collapses into a proceduralized routine that ignores the nuances of humanity, learning is reduced to pre-categorized, generic outputs, and human teachers are soon rendered interchangeable with AI in systems that prioritize standardization over responsiveness.

That's why teaming matters so much. We think the fate of public schooling in America relies on us getting this right. Teaming isn't a free-form exercise, nor is it another box to check. It's a distinct type of relationship unique to the task and school environment. When it's working well, there's an empowering sense of common purpose. It inspires collaboration and

produces an intelligence that we can share. But when our teaming is low-functioning, its underperforming impact has a profound effect on both teachers and students.

The Unique Relationship of Teaming

Sharing attention in teaming nurtures a unique brand of relationship amongst one's colleagues, and this is central to the stance we're taking in writing this book. Culturally responsive teaming creates space for teachers to test ideas, interrogate their content, and clarify their thinking. Our claims unfold over eight chapters; the first, Chapter 1, is an introduction to the problem of overwhelm felt by many, and the final, Chapter 8, concludes with an invitation for teams to dream. The six chapters in between are composed of six habits of thinking, which, when practiced with others, constitute a way of relating to one another and the craft itself.

In Chapter 2, teaming is defined as a journey of vulnerability with twists and turns that require something personal and professional from us. Our focus in Chapter 3 is reflective thinking, which we see as a habit of intentionally drawing on our cultural identities in order to make meaning of our experiences. Chapter 4 centers relationships in the teaming task of listening and observing with understanding and empathy—and we include our relationship with the teaming task in the consideration of our relationships with each other. The habit of questioning and innovative problem-posing is the topic of Chapter 5; questioning is the lifeline for rigor in teaming because it keeps us in an active rather than merely passive role. In Chapter 6, we re-imagine data to highlight our colleagues' assets and better mine something meaningful from the diverse reservoir of experiences brought to bear in the teaming task. And Chapter 7 aligns our habits of mind for teaming with the essential task of designing with a focus on engagement. Every chapter includes a *Composing Cultures of Collaboration* section with activities to help support your unique culture-building efforts. These activities should be thought of as exercises to which you and your colleagues can regularly return to clarify and evolve a flourishing culture for teaming.

We hold strongly to the belief that public schools play an essential role in a thriving multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multicultural society, and our greatest hope for the well-being of

schools into the emerging future is in the way teachers may come together empowered with the understanding that the culture for their teaming is something that can be actively composed together. You don't have to be close, personal friends with your teaming colleagues. But the relationship requires that you remain focused on the teaming task. A sense of shared purpose assists in moving beyond trivial differences, and a genuine appreciation for the assets of those with whom your team adds qualitative value to the collaboration. Differences in experience, perspectives, and backgrounds don't have to be perceived as a deficit. In fact, it can be material useful to the work and the grounds for hope on the journey.

American education has significant structural issues, and we have opinions on some of those for sure; but we're most concerned with our colleagues—the teachers. And teaching, as a collective, currently has a self-esteem problem. We're in need not so much of a pep talk but rather actual tools to keep us going. So, in the further interest of our transparency, having already revealed our assumptions, we can also confess that we have an agenda in writing this book. We are heartbroken when we see teachers struggling in very real ways with their work in schools, and we are devastated when we see talented and competent teachers prematurely walk away from the profession for feeling unsupported through the many difficulties affecting the craft.

We want teachers to feel encouraged and rewarded enough to stay. Retention isn't something that is engineered directly, but it is what happens when teaming works. When teachers regularly experience responsiveness in collaboration, schools improve … and the people who've invested in those spaces also stay. While the system's external support is a factor, it's the culture of the school and, in particular, the immediate thought-partnering relationships one shares with others, that ultimately matter most for the individual. Our hope for you, the reader, is that this book will provide support for building a culture for teaming where you and your colleagues can do your best work and flourish in the process.



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1 Here, Hold My Baby

Throughout our years as classroom teachers, there's one thing we've never understood: *Where are all the babies coming from?* No, we aren't referring to our own students. And no, we aren't implying that we don't understand basic human reproduction. What we're thinking of are all the babies and newborn initiatives that the system kept bringing for us to hold.

We know that "the system" is actually people in various roles, many with well-meaning and even visionary intentions. It's easy for us to believe these persons earnestly wanting what's best for kids. These individuals, acting on behalf of the system and in support of teachers, have been asked for help in making our classrooms better, more inclusive, and more equitable. They also have the position, authority, and the budget to make decisions that would positively influence schools and classrooms across the district. In their quest to give teachers and communities what they've asked for, they take this budget and buy a baby. This baby is usually a product, program, or strategy based on wonderful ideas that worked for someone, somewhere, under some generic conditions.

These people, making use of the system's authority and budgets, spend lots of time and invest precious resources to care for their baby because, in their minds, this was the magnificent thing—the happy, bouncy, beautiful thing—that would solve some pesky problem of practice. They believed in their babies: their SEL (social and emotional learning) babies, their Multi-Tiered

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Systems of Support (MTSS) babies, their Universal Design for Learning (UDL) babies, their "write the learning target in student-friendly language on the board" babies. And why shouldn't they? These are exciting new ideas (well, often recycled but new-sounding), and it's presented as if it's just a single new thing, … a simple adjustment on everyone's part … because you see, in their eyes, all the babies are perfectly behaved only-children, existing outside the larger context of a classroom with all its various moving parts. And then one day, after adopting these babies, full of pride and with genuine enthusiasm, having signed all the paperwork, ordered all the books and planned the rollout, they turn to the teachers and say: *Here, hold my baby.*

And so we find ourselves in classrooms of roughly 30 (or more!) students all day long, who change every hour, trying our hardest to concentrate on them and their needs. All the while, we know that building relationships and community with students is of paramount importance, but we're also being told that we need to read the email, to apply the SEL goal of the day, to record attendance in the first 5 minutes of class, to offer personalized instruction or support, to make sure that all lessons have choice boards and leveled readings and … and … and … we just can't possibly hold all these babies!

To be clear, we believe that multi-tiered student supports, SEL, Inclusion, Universal Design, and many others of these babies are excellent practices, incredibly important and necessary; but when they are represented as individual ideas or mandates, the complex task of teaching quickly becomes super messy and overwhelming. We hear all the time that teachers' plates are full. We can relate. We remember feeling our plates were not just full but the biscuit had already been moved onto the napkin, and the mashed potatoes were spilling over onto the table, while the gravy was running off into our lap! This is not the way to empower teachers or to make them feel successful. Instead, for many, the full-plate feeling can cause a sense of continual panic that provokes distrust of the system that feels as though it's working against their best teaching efforts. When the system consistently compels teachers to manage unintegrated mandates, it undermines their professional self-esteem, causing doubt and weakened confidence that our effort can produce the outcomes we're accountable for.

At the heart of all of these promising practices are foundational habits that are, as Gloria Ladson-Billings says, the elements of *just good teaching*. The planning and practice methods of the Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) mental model allow for the combining of all of these beautiful babies and create a framework for equitable practices that is innately inclusive and universally designed, attends to the social and emotional needs of learners, increases student resilience and grit, and develops habits of thinking that inform the many decisions that teachers make on any given day.

Which brings us to the point of this book. We've observed in our thought-partnerships and professional development with educators that CRE is, in fact, a way to get out of holding all those babies—or more accurately, a way to understand and adopt all the babies into a holistic practice rather than treating them as patchwork solutions. So, if we were to summarize in one awkward sentence that uses the word culture too many times: This is a book about how teams can build the culture for culturally responsive teaming in the design of culturally responsive learning experiences to close Equity gaps in education.

Equity in Education is the policy and practice directive aimed at providing quality and effective learning opportunities so that background and identity are neither correlative nor predictive of student performance and/or achievement outcomes (Figure 1.1). Equity is measured differently than its ideological kin equality. While equality focuses on the sameness of inputs,

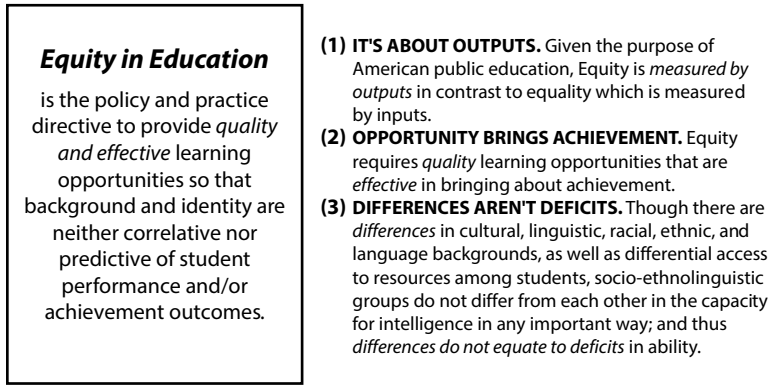


Figure 1.1 Equity in Education is …

Equity is concerned with the outcomes. This matters especially for culturally responsive teaming because when it comes to Equity, difference does not equal deficit. Equity requires that pedagogy be designed so that all students receive quality and effective opportunities to learn.[1]

In the end, we don't want teachers to merely survive, we want for teachers (and students) to flourish. We want teachers to feel like they can be effective with effective effort. We want teachers to be empowered in the belief that they are capable to "execute the courses of action required to attain the desired outcomes" (Bandura, 1993). We've seen how CRE can support thriving classrooms so that teaching (and learning) is both an exciting and incredibly gratifying experience. But this book isn't about just convincing you, the reader, that *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom* is the way for any individual teacher to plan and teach; rather, our argument is that the key to Equity in Education is for the CRE mental model to be used with integrity within collaborative teams and across schools and districts. We are advocating for a shift in consciousness in the culture of schools for culturally responsive teaming.

▶ WHY TEAMS?

At first, it was just a noticing. As we worked alongside more and more teachers in the CRE residencies, certain patterns began to stand out. In those places where the approach really seemed to click, it became more than a set of strategies; it was a way for teams and teachers to handle the many demands of their work with a greater sense of connection and clarity. Over time, we began to see why. Teams that already had trusting relationships—or were willing to take the risk of building that trust—were the ones most able to co-create the shared habits of thinking that would keep CRE alive and growing long after the residency ended.

CRE can be defined as a mental model that is useful for identifying themes and tools of practice for closing opportunity gaps. The CRE mental model gives conceptual context for policies and practices that focus on Equity without marginalizing some students relative to others. It actively enlists the awareness of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and other

social identity markers that shape the perceptions of educational opportunities (Stembridge, 2020). There are many ways to describe a culturally responsive learning environment, and we've seen it at all grade levels and in all sorts of variations. What's been consistent, in our experience, is both a matter of structure and feeling. These are spaces where students are engaged, invested, even absorbed. Learning goes far beyond the acquisition of facts. Students are encouraged to make personal meaning of the material to connect understandings to their own lives. Again and again, we see the evidence of behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement.

The CRE mental model is something more than a checklist. It's a way to embed the themes of CRE into how we design learning experiences—experiences that connect to students' identities while also challenging them with rigorous opportunities to learn. It gives structure to habits for thinking deeply about the craft of teaching. We grow most in our cultural responsiveness when we plan and practice with these habits in mind.[2]

Over time, as we watched teams of teachers thrive in collaboration more than they ever could in isolation, the picture came into focus. Our thesis came to life right in front of us: humans are profoundly social, and we learn best in connection with others. Our brains are adaptable, and our learning is powered by both social interaction and emotion. Emotion doesn't sit apart from thinking—it co-pilots, steering our motivation, influencing our decisions, and creating our values and relationships. A sense of competence, safety, and belonging isn't just nice to have; it's essential for learning (Barsalou, 1993, 2008; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). We see all of this happening in strong teams, where teachers are engaged.

The Three Overarching Premises

This book is developed around three overarching premises:

1. *Planning in teams is the highest leverage behavior in Culturally Responsive Education.*

Planning is where brilliant teaching is born. Not charisma, but planning is what allows teachers to grab hold of those dynamic

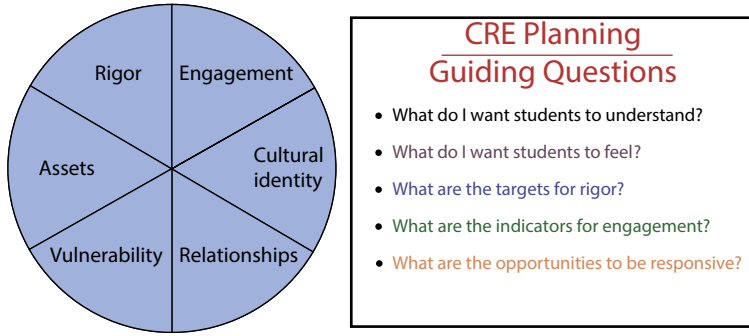


Figure 1.2 The CRE Mental Model

moments that may seem like magic materializing right before our eyes, but is actually well-designed, responsive instruction. Being prepared to be surprised and responsive to students' engagement isn't the same as being unprepared and good at winging it. It's planning that allows teachers to more effectively leverage responsive practices and to more brilliantly improvise in the most beneficial ways for the students in front of us.

The six themes of CRE (see Figure 1.2) are a kind of conceptual vocabulary we can use to understand our students and the context for their learning and achievement in school. The five planning questions can similarly be thought of as the grammar rules for how to use the vocabulary of the six themes. Taken together, the six themes and the five planning questions serve as tools that support the design of instruction that reliably leads to responsive learning experiences for students. And we think of culturally responsive learning experiences as those in which students are able to leverage their cultural fluencies in building integrated (head and heart) understandings of learning targets.

Culturally responsive teams model the CRE themes that we want to see in our instruction. When we feel like the team values our assets, when we are in relationship with each other and the task at hand, when our teams recognize our cultural identities and all that we bring to the table—we are much more likely to engage. Culturally responsive teams are purposeful in building protective factors to counter the risk factors involved in any type of rigorous, collaborative planning process. These CRE themes are part of a recipe that will lead each team member to

developing their own culturally responsive mental qualities in a transformative and not merely perfunctory way.

You may be thinking, *So why write a whole book just to tell us to collaborate? Why don't we just grab CRE in the Classroom and plan together using the planning questions?* Well, you certainly can take the CRE mental model and start using it with your team, but that alone won't make your actual collaboration stronger. To do that, you have to be intentional about creating a culture for teaming, because that's what makes true meaning-making possible.

We teachers are in the meaning-making business. We think of teaching as a kind of art that works through the medium of experience so that students can learn and grow into flourishing humans. Our craft facilitates meaning-making opportunities for our students, which, when successful, yield life-changing understandings. We also collaborate in making meaning of teaching in teaming, which seems easy enough except that meaning and understanding are deeply social and cultural, and not just the product of individual learning.

The heart of creating a culture for culturally responsive teaming—even with differences in backgrounds, beliefs, or the friction of personality clashes—is building a shared understanding of the task at hand that grounds every aspect of the collaboration. This begins with acknowledging the profound complexity of culture's role in the human experience. Culture influences how we humans make meaning of everything. Our cultural experiences are threaded through every part of us, how we think and what motivates us, how we reason and see ourselves. Teaming strengthens our capacity for culturally responsive habits of thinking by giving us space to dialogue, build common ground, and keep our shared points of reference for the craft clear and ready to operationalize.

The cultural environments we're born into transport the accumulated knowledge of countless prior generations. When we team with our colleagues, we're not just interacting with them as individuals; rather, we're in collaboration with the understandings passed down by our collective forebears. Teaming is more than a meeting of minds in the present; it's part of a much vaster conversation that stretches across time and place.

Meaning-making is never just an individual pursuit. It's a recursive cognitive process—formed by shared cultural concepts—that builds, back and forth, over time, and across generations. And when our planning draws on the full identities and experiences of everyone involved, the chances of creating something truly worth our students' time and energy grow exponentially. Meaning-making isn't merely a mental activity, it's a social process. Therefore, if planning is the high-leverage activity necessary for CRE, then planning in teams is the *highest* leverage activity.

2. *Culturally responsive teaming requires and builds emotional investment in teaching and learning.*

Yes, it's true that even if you don't have the luxury of a team of colleagues to support your planning, you can use the CRE mental model to improve your craft all by yourself. But from our point of view, it's more difficult and certainly much less fun to be practicing these habits of thinking in isolation. Anyone who's ever been on a team that functions especially well knows that success involves more than just having good teaming protocols. There's a social component to the experience. To take on a challenge as a team leaves a different emotional signature than a solo performance. Strong teams share a commitment. In schools, we have to commit to the effort to build the culture for teaming that supports culturally responsive habits of thinking. But culture can be a slippery thing, its symbols readily recognized but its effects harder to build without clear and shared intentions.

Culture is often represented in fashion and customs, but it's also much, much more than that. A rather formal-sounding definition of culture is "a cohesive set of mental representations (ideas, beliefs, and values) and their manifestations (behavioral practices, artifacts, and institutions) shared by a group and acquired by new generations through social learning" (Gendron et al., 2020). Culture refers to the habits, beliefs, and norms that affect decision-making and behaviors and also govern the social interactions among the members of a group. That's one definition for culture.

There are actually many ways that we can define culture, and we will return to these throughout this book. We can think of

culture as a shared conceptual system—the markers and references "people like us" use to make meaning of situations like X, Y, and Z. We can think of culture as a repertoire of habits, a toolkit of sorts; the skills and styles that people groups use to navigate life. And we can also think of culture as what people do, the patterns of behaviors, the formal and informal rituals, that embody the social structures and expectations within the group. Or as Frans de Waal put it: "culture is how we do and think about things, transmitted by nongenetic means" (Sapolsky, 2017).

The intention to build the culture for teaming is part of the common ground essential for culturally responsive teaming. We all have to give it. We are yielding to something bigger than our individual egos. That can be a difficult task all by itself. *Intentions have an emotional texture.* We commit because we care.

We can also think of emotion as part of a conceptual system. That is, the ways humans make meaning of emotions are profoundly informed by culture—as in, different cultures have different languages and concepts for emotions. Emotion concepts like "fear," "anger," and "happiness" are socially transmitted from one generation to the next:

> Beyond individual emotion concepts, different cultures don't even agree on what "emotion" is. Westerners think of emotion as an experience inside an individual, in the body. Many other cultures, however, characterize emotions as interpersonal events that require two or more people…. More intriguingly, some cultures don't even have a unified concept of "Emotion" for the experiences that Westerners lump together as emotional.
>
> (Barrett, 2017)

Our point isn't so much to label group variances but rather to confirm that the experiences of emotion are expressed differently according to cultural context. We certainly aren't teaming merely with our intellects alone. Everything we think we understand is qualitatively molded by emotion. Culturally responsive teaming invites our identities and emotions to the task of tackling problems of practice together; and our emotions engage

our cultural fluencies whenever we are fully committed to any experience.

A key feature of the CRE mental model is thinking about how we want students to feel. All the same neuro-scientific principles that underscore that guiding question in planning also hold true for teachers. One of our favorite cognitive scientists, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang writes that: "Emotion forms the rudder that steers learners' thinking, in effect, helping to call up information and memories that are relevant to the topic or problem at hand" (Immordino-Yang, 2015). In other words, emotional focus underscores cognitive focus. We would even go so far as to say that emotion is essential to teaming because our affect directs our attention to the task. "Whatever you're having emotion about is what you're thinking about" (Immordino-Yang, 2021).

Emotion is what drives both students and teachers to make meaning out of most anything. The CRE mental model encourages teachers to capitalize on our own social and emotional capacities to build our habits of thinking with one another. And yes, there is individual learning through trial-and-error and first-hand experience, but we humans are a profoundly social species, and all learning is either acquired through or applied in some social context. Any learning that isn't shared and embedded in some social practice is inevitably lost. We're smarter together than we can be as individuals—and this is true not in spite of our emotions about the teaming task but because of it.

Which brings us to our third major premise for this book:

3. *Equity requires building a robust teaming culture and intelligence.*

There are many ways to think of intelligence, but here, we'll take the position of the anthropologist or anyone interested in that strange branch of the primate tree, *Homo sapiens*. In the simplest sense, intelligence is the ability to learn that which keeps the individual alive (Barrett, 2017; Boyd & Richerson, 2005; Dewey, 1910; Henrich, 2020; Hofstadter & Sander, 2013). Just as a person is able to use their intelligence to understand and solve the problems of one's life, a team is able to use its intelligence to understand and solve the problems of practice.

Our goal in teaming isn't to perfect the task of making one specific lesson; rather, our task is to be able to produce a robust arrangement of learning experiences that are designed to match the needs and assets of a particular population of students—*our students.* Our goal is to create teams that consistently make intelligent choices and are innovative in their approach to the problems of practice in the design of learning experiences and opportunities for students. To perform this teaming task in non-standard conditions can be thought of as a function of teaming intelligence.

In constructivist approaches, learning is a meaning-making process shaped by the constant correspondence between the personal and the collective (Barrett, 2017). Vibrant teaming works the same way: the individuals on a team learn from and with each other, building what we call *teaming intelligence*. This is the kind of learning that's useful for the work at hand, in the particular school and community where it happens. We learn from our students, and our administrators, and social media, and history books and biographies … and the entire sociocultural ecosystem in our uniquely defined environmental niches (Barrett, 2017; Cole & Engeström, 1993; Gendron et al., 2020). Adaptive teams deepen their understanding of the teaming task itself and, at the same time, learn how to build the culture for culturally responsive teaming.

We think of teaming intelligence as the ability to address the assigned tasks while maintaining the integrity of core values. Teams that function intelligently perform and produce the CRE mental qualities. At the heart of intelligence is the ability to interrogate our own thinking, to assess our understandings, to stay engaged through conflict, and to share in the study of meanings. But there's a complication: meaning is a current point and not a fixed one. Have you ever been sure of an understanding, only to be faced with a scenario at some later time which made you question yourself? Understandings are fundamentally situation- and context-dependent. Our teaming methods reflect the shared understanding of the task; it sets the behavioral and emotional climate and also frames how thinking and insight are shared across the team.

The system is unlikely to run out of babies for us to hold—every new year brings forth a new initiative, some more helpful

than others—and those babies carry a kind of institutional meaning. The solutions offered by the system reflect its *actual* priorities, even if unspoken, and say something about the institutional perceptions—perceptions of the problems of practice, of the capacities of teachers, and of the abilities of students. They convey some institutional ethic. They represent the system's expectations, and by extension, its true values. Like it or not, our own sense of esteem is tied to how well we take care of babies that we don't always like!

Humans have to learn how to human (v), and culture is our primary curriculum. All learning happens in a social context, sculpted by the cultural fluencies we carry and encounter. Equity means ensuring every student has access to learning they perceive as meaningful—learning that allows them to draw on their social and cultural literacies to demonstrate competence (Stembridge, 2023). CRE is how we embody Equity in practice. *It's the Equity effect.* And therefore, it's essential that teams co-construct common ground that includes shared beliefs about what Equity requires of us.

▶ THE PRIMARY TASK OF TEAMING

We can think of these overarching premises as the indicators of teacher engagement in teaming. It's a clear indication of behavioral engagement when teachers enthusiastically put their talents to work to design culturally responsive learning experiences for their students. The affective engagement shows when teachers are making the effort to build a culture in which they feel part of a team and can be vulnerable enough to ask the inelegant questions required to push past misunderstandings, conflicts, and differences in opinion. And it's obvious that teachers are cognitively engaged when they practice the habits of thinking that, when distributed collectively as a shared responsibility, build a robust teaming intelligence.

The primary task of the teams we most often work with is to develop learning experiences and assessments that draw on students' cultural fluencies while providing meaningful opportunities to learn. This would be difficult enough even in the most ideal, controlled, and sanitized circumstances, but our task is profoundly dynamic because the conditions for teaching are

decidedly nonstandard. The modern, 21st-century environment for schooling requires that a culturally responsive team be able to generate its own direction and re-direction. In other words, we have to be able to manage our behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement in accordance with the task.

There are habits of thinking that initiate recurring behaviors in culturally responsive teaching. When practiced in teams, they increase possibilities both for the capacity of the team and the individuals. To *view teaching and learning as a journey and not a destination*, one has to be ready and willing to learn from and with others (Chapter 2). We can never know it all. It's important to stay fresh in our craft. The sociocultural context for teaching has changed dramatically in a short period of time, and we don't want to return to schooling as usual. Assuming that something has worked in the past ignores that kids are bringing new identities, experiences, and cultural fluencies to the table daily. Through good habits in teaming, we're able to best focus our shared attention. Thinking about where to go next in this journey is enhanced by collaboration. *Regularly thinking about one's thinking* is supported by thought-partnerships (Chapter 3). To learn to *listen and observe with understanding and empathy* expands the capacity to see situations from multiple viewpoints (Chapter 4).

Good teaming encourages its members to question their methods and to be *innovative in problem-posing* (Chapter 5). Innovation by definition requires many ideas and perspectives. If we are planning and thinking as a team, we're able to see many more roads to engagement as well as help one another redefine what engagement might look like for different students at different moments in their learning. *Mining actionable data from colleagues' experiences* is a result of our efforts to see our professional partners' assets beyond the demographic labels—even as we know that our own cultural lens tints what we see in others (Chapter 6). To see engagement through the eyes of others affords divergent pathways for us and others to show their learning. *Designing learning experiences with a focus on engagement* is a constant goal for all educators; however, our toolkit is limited if we only have our own experiences, abilities, and cultural repertoires from which to draw (Chapter 7).

The CRE mental model (Figure 1.2) allows teams to build better understandings of promising practices by harnessing the

collective brainpower. To share attention is a distribution of cognition toward the teaming task. In these generative teaming spaces, shared attention yields both a richer, more vital relationship with content and also with each other. We're able to expand our understandings of what we want our students to understand. The thinking that benefits teaming is not confined to any one individual but is constructed and supported by colleagues, tools, and the cultural and physical environments. It's impractical to expect that teams can learn all they need to know through exclusive dependence on the system's resources. We've often seen that teachers learn as much or more from each other than they do even from the so-called experts who lead the professional development. In teaming, we have access to the valuable resource of each others' experiences and understandings.

Hopefully, we're beginning to explain that Equity requires culturally responsive teaming. Inequities persist when students are subject to the randomness of the master schedule. Equity is best accomplished when our students benefit from all of our assets in the collective, not just those of the teacher they've been assigned. The answer is not canned curriculum so that all students are getting the same scripted, rote instruction that isn't designed with their assets and learning contexts in mind. Rather, the answer is for teachers to work collaboratively to create the culture in their teams where they develop the habits of thinking together that actualize the CRE mental model and push one another's insights. Teaching is harder than ever, and teaming is a rich problem space—complex, creative, and deeply human—where we uncover and affirm meaning and understanding. And when teaming is embraced as a setting for deepening the understandings for craft, we position ourselves to design learning experiences that are both culturally responsive and transformative for students.

▶ COMPOSING CULTURES OF COLLABORATION



Much like the composition of a piece of art or music, your team will have places where the colors or notes blend, bounce off one another, and combine to make new colors or melodies. Throughout the book, you will have the opportunity in these

end-of-chapter activities to compose your own context, styles, and notes to make the unique piece that is your team culture. For this first chapter, we suggest you pause and complete the following now, as well as revisit this prompt whenever you are beginning with a new team, or even a new teaming task or experience. You could also use the same sprint journal format with different prompts in the future.

Intention Setting Sprint Journal

In this quick-write, everyone will record their thoughts in response to the prompt. Afterwards, each person will share a highlighted sentence or two, looking for connections and ideas on how we might respond and engage with one another to make the teaming experience as meaningful and intentional as possible.

Prompt: What do I intend to gain from teaming?
Directions:

- Set a timer for five minutes.
- Make sure that everyone has a journal, tablet, or other way to record their thoughts.
- Once the timer starts, all the team colleagues begin to write and must continuously write for the entire five minutes. (If you run out of things to say, write "I have run out of things to say" until something else pops into your head, and then continue.)
- When time is up, take a few seconds to a minute to review your writing and choose a sentence or two, or the most salient thought you would like to share.

Take turns sharing out what you have selected with one another. Think about what connections you can make between your intentions and where you can help to align your efforts and engagement.

Notes

1. This book follows in the path of two others authored by Adeyemi Stembridge, which discuss culturally responsive pedagogy in terms of Equity. For the fuller definition and description of the

context and key concepts relative to Equity in Education, we would advise consulting chapter two of **Brilliant Teaching: Using Culture and Artful Thinking to Close Equity Gaps**, Stembridge (2023).

2. The CRE mental model is described in **Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom: An Equity Framework for Pedagogy** (Stembridge, 2020).

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