The Professional Learning Series for Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy

Facilitated by The Centre for Urban Schooling
OISE, University of Toronto

Four Years of Professional Learning: Collaboration with Teacher Candidates and Associate Teachers

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The Paloma Foundation

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Recognition of The Paloma Foundation

In January of 2009, The Centre for Urban Schooling (CUS) at OISE made a proposal to the Paloma Foundation in order to launch its *Professional Learning Series for Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy* for current teachers within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The Paloma Foundation agreed with the importance of the project and to provide the core funding. Over a four-year period, the funding received from the Paloma Foundation was primarily utilized to provide release time for teachers to attend the professional learning sessions.

Since the start of the *CRRP Professional Learning Series*, in the fall of 2009, thru the spring of 2013, this project has engaged approximately 100 teachers from kindergarten through grade eight within the TDSB schools. These teachers, in turn, have communicated their learning, new methods and curriculum ideas to their colleagues, their schools and their communities.

Project Purpose and Rationale

Issues related to equitable educational experiences and outcomes are a priority in North American schooling systems. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, as well as many other educational policies, recommendations, and educational bodies, have called for educators to explore their practices and the outcomes of schooling. Specifically, standardized provincial assessment data, school-based achievement data, and student voice as well, speak to differential experiences and opportunities for success for different groups in the local school systems. Educators must have space and time to learn more about, reflect on, critically examine, talk about and take action on these issues to create change.

Since 2005, the Centre for Urban Schooling (CUS) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) has focused its work on the issues that impact racialized and historically marginalized youth in Toronto. CUS faculty and staff members highlight and explore the complexities of urban schooling environments that connect to issues of equity and are dedicated to improving the educational experiences and outcomes for youth in schools, especially those for whom the current system has not and does not work.

One response to the current situation, from the CUS School Services Division, was to create the *Professional Learning Series for Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy* (CRRP). This learning series invited current teachers to build a professional learning community focused on equity in education. In the series, the teachers talked about and learned about issues that are impacting the students in their schools. The series also supported teachers in becoming school leaders and taking actions to create change. The participating teachers worked with each other and teacher candidates in the Inner City Option at OISE to provide support and to build their collective professional thinking and curriculum.

The literature on teacher training shows that too often teacher candidates' experiences during practicum do not focus on issues of equity in teaching, and the university experience then becomes quite different from the "real world" experience of teaching. This professional series was an attempt to support equity-minded educators in the field AND a way to bring the realities of equity-focused teaching to the teacher candidates who desire to teach in urban communities and tackle issues of equity and social justice while they do so. Our hope was that the common language and content would provide a foundation for this type of new teacher learning.

Although the impact of this project is not directly measurable through student achievement data, the voices of participants, qualitatively captured along the way, has indicated that this work has contributed to teacher reflection, growth, and application of new strategies, which in the end, will support positive impacts for students.

The Equity Continuum
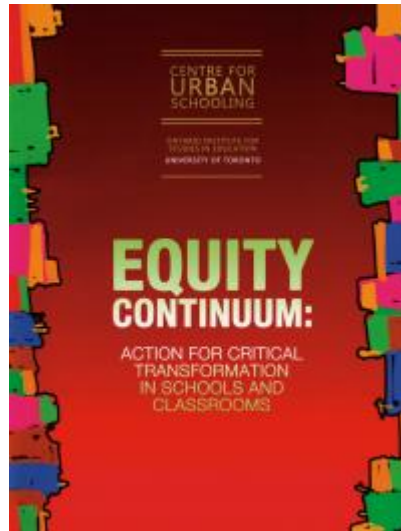
The focus of the professional series was tied to the work of the Centre's Framework for Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (2008) and then subsequently to the Centre's text, *The Equity Continuum : Action for Critical Transformation in Schools and Classrooms* (2011). The work within this text was linked to the the theoretical bodies of work on Culturally Relevant Teaching/Pedagogy by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) and Culturally Responsive Teaching. This Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy focuses on holding high expectations; building a community where learners see themselves and are valued; and challenging status quo, by among other things, addressing issues such as racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism/homophobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression, and how they play out in the world and in schools. However, the CUS Framework for CRRP extends this discourse to entire schools and thinking about this equity work tied to entire school experiences.

In this text, we provide indicators for equitable practices and "look-fors" within classrooms and schools that demonstrate a baseline for educational equity work. The text covers seven areas/tenets to consider regarding equitable educational practices: Classroom Climate and Instruction, School Climate, Student Voice and Space, Family/Caregiver-School Relations, School Leadership, Community Connections, and Culture of Professional Development. This resource was then utilized in this professional learning series to build and add to important queries in school sites that speak to multiple aspects of equity.

To share highlights from over the past four years, this report has taken a "snap shot" of some individual and collaborative work tied to CRRP and focused on the seven key areas that were the foundation for the CUS Framework and have become a part of the *Equity Continuum*. With each example, we provide the "indicator" from the *Equity Continuum* and the page number on which it is located. We believe that this type of work in schools can be transformative and impact teachers and students in positive ways for years to come.

The CRRP Seminar Series

The *Professional Learning Series for Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy* was a professional opportunity for K-8 school teachers within the Toronto District School Board. Over four years, approximately 100 teacher candidates also participated in the series. Teachers within the board, associate teachers, and their respective teacher candidates, engaged in the series content and learning either by coming to OISE for seminar sessions or through collaborative Centre projects within the board. Associate teacher participants then returned to their schools and engaged in Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogical approaches in their schools. In total, we estimate that the series has had a direct effect on the teachers who taught at least 2,500 students.

Here are some examples of activities that participating associate teachers had the opportunity to engage in over the course of the four-year series:

- Meet once a month to learn more about and discuss the components and practical application of CRRP;
- Engage in 1.5 days of training on Participatory Action Research (PAR) with staff from the Center for Participatory Action Research from the Graduate Center, City University of New York;
- Create a PAR project in their own classroom or school based on a need related to equity or social justice issues;
- Build a community of support with other TDSB colleagues who were engaged in equity focused work;
- Support the development of new equity-minded teachers by hosting an OISE Inner City Option teacher candidate for both practicum blocks; and
- Engage in planning and co-teaching with teacher candidates connected to practicum assignments focusing on CRRP and issues of equity.

Classroom Climate and Instruction

This tenet focuses on what happens within the classroom. It deals with the atmosphere of the immediate learning environment, as well as both the explicit and hidden curriculum. Here are some of the ways teachers integrated this tenet:

Artifact 1:

"Students see their lives and others' represented in the materials, books, pictures, teachers, administrators, etc., within the classroom and school. The curriculum speaks to the lives of the students in the classroom and does not mandate a 'one-size fits all curriculum' based on a white middle-class societal view" (p.13).

"Student input is essential" (p. 16).

This is an example of a project designed by a librarian and a grade one teacher as their culminating project for the series. They taught grade one students how to analyze their independent reading books to find discover 'Who is included?' and 'Who is left out?' They graphed their information, drew pictures of what/who they wanted to see in books, and wrote letters to the librarian asking for more books to reflect those students whose lives were not included in the classroom texts.

Two areas that the students noted were missing were children who use wheelchairs and children with two moms or two dads.

"I now understand the importance of a curriculum for all."

Participant Comment

Artifact 2:

"The curriculum encourages learning through action, especially by working together, which makes a difference in the world" (p. 14).

Projects like these encourage students to become informed about current issues and engage in advocacy through writing essays, collecting data and even writing letters to politicians, as seen here.
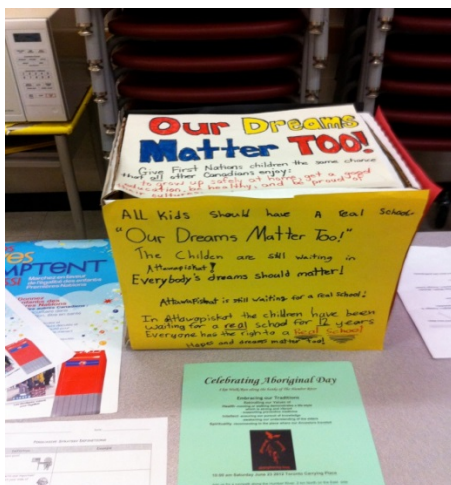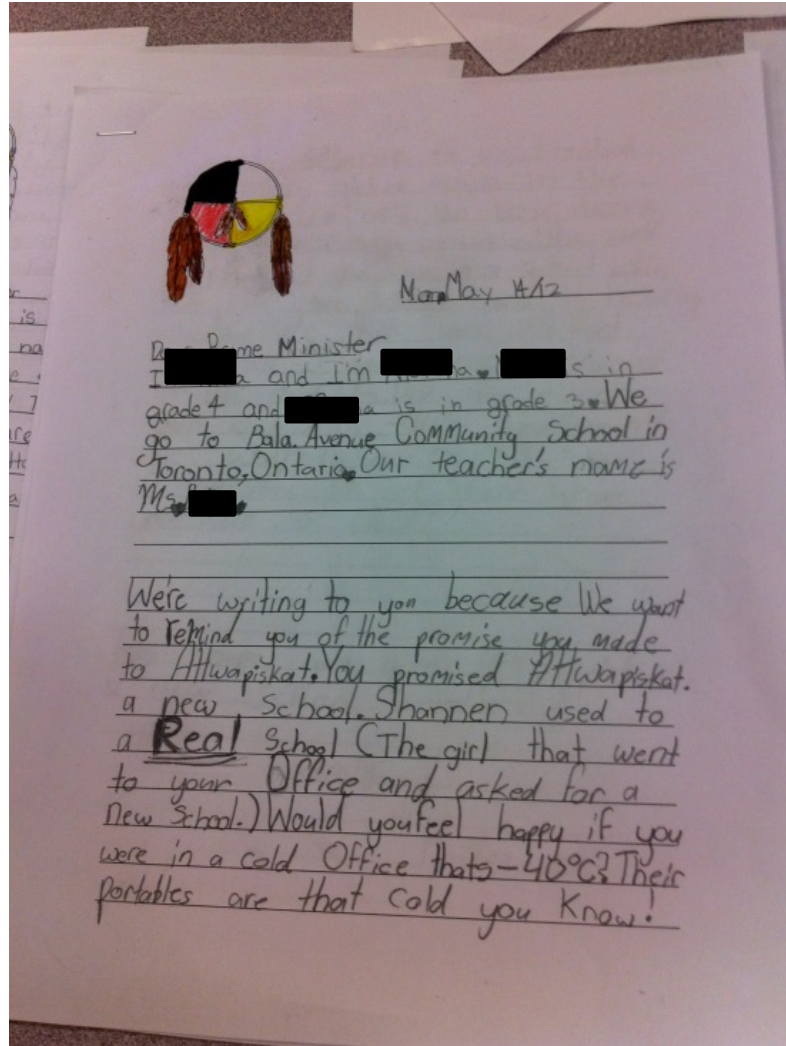
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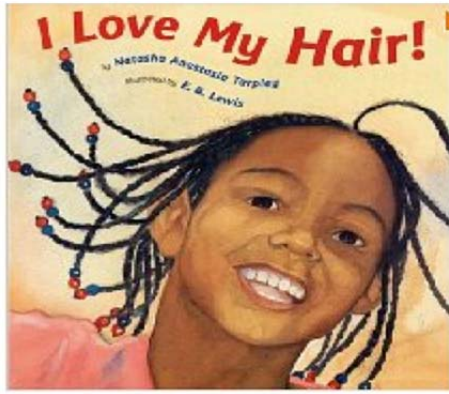
"Issues of social justice – anti-racism, anti-classism, anti-sexism, anti-ableism, and anti-homophobia – are central to the classroom curriculum and building students' critical thinking skills" (p. 12).

An exploration of identity allowed grade 1 students opportunities to examine physical aspects of self that communicate racial identity. They challenged negative assumptions about who they are and the way they look. The students then wrote poems and made pictures to highlight their love of self.

I love my skin colour because it is brown.

I love my eyes because they are oval.

I love my shirt because it is red and pink.

I love my hijab because it has a sparkle.

I am a girl.
I am a female.
I am lovely,
I am black

Gender Norms and Expectations-

In exploring gender norms and expectations within society, this middle school class deconstructed the images that we all see daily. They brainstormed ways to challenge the stereotyping.

"As a lifelong learner, I know I need to constantly challenge myself."

Participant Comment

School Climate

Teachers are responsible for creating and nurturing a positive learning environment not only in their classrooms, but in the school as a whole. This topic was of great importance throughout the series.

Artifact 1:
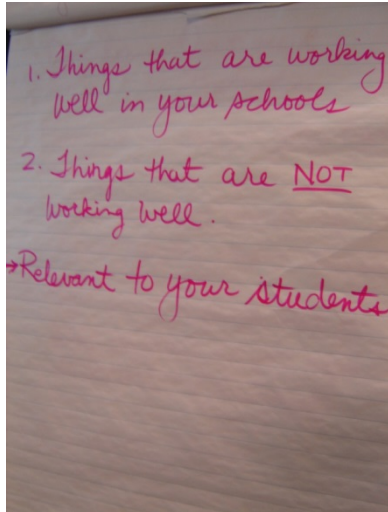
"The school has clear procedures that encourage students, parents/caregivers and teachers to work together to address school climate issues" (p. 23).

Left: An example of an activity from the series for affecting school climate by creating an action plan.

Participants used the following chart as a way to conceive of an action plan for bringing about change:

What is the equity/CRRP issue that needs addressing in your school?	
How are you determining that this is THE issue that needs your focus at this time?	
What would be your goal/s in addressing this issue?	
Who are the stakeholders with whom you should consult or with on this issue?	
What are the first steps in moving forward regarding this issue?	

<u>Artifact 2:</u>

"The school is a safe space and also creates additional secure spaces where students can affirm all aspects of their social identities, and build a foundation of confidence, self-esteem and self-awareness" (p. 24).

One of the associate teachers in the project discussed an issue that surfaced in her school at Halloween. She observed that many students with cultural or religious objections to the holiday had no choice but to sit in the library during the celebrations. She realized that this structure was inequitable and didn't reflect the diversity of the school. This teacher decided to convene a group of teachers to discuss this issue and to host a fun event for the students who couldn't or chose not to participate in the controversial Western holiday. This teacher credits the series for helping top facilitate these kinds of challenging conversations in her school. It became the first of many conversations about holidays and issues of inclusion/exclusion for students.

Student Voice and Space

This tenet ensures that students feel their voices are valued in their schools. They are encouraged to cultivate positive self-expression, and their input is used by teachers and administrators who make decisions that affect students' lives.

Artifact 1:

"There are processes and structures in place that allow and encourage students to become involved in decision-making, in both the classroom and school; and to learn that their participation has real impact" (p. 27).

One aspect of the series over the four years was teaching Associate Teachers and Teacher Candidates about the exciting potential of Participatory Action Research (PAR). It is based on the understanding that those most impacted by research should take the lead in framing the questions, designs, methods, analysis and determining what actions might be the most useful for solutions. PAR techniques allow students to express their ideas and concerns, engage in conducting research to answer their questions and develop methods for sharing their findings in efforts to make change.
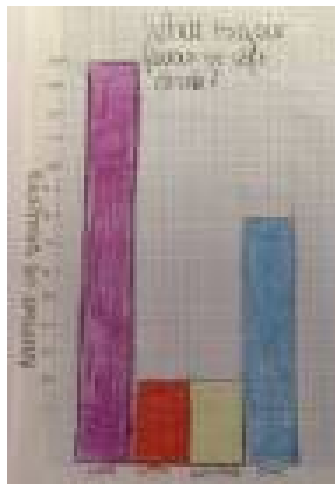
"Students have become more empowered to make change."

Participating Teacher
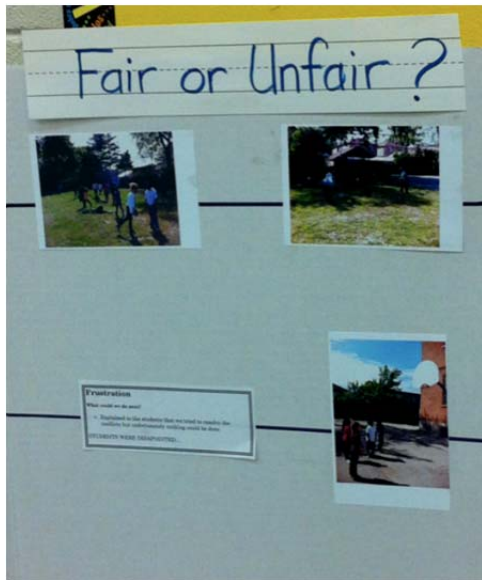
One group of teachers in the series decided to focus on the use of PAR in elementary math classes. They engaged the students in questioning to find out what was a concern for them at school. One group found that bullying at recess was an overwhelming response. The teachers then decided to support the students to figure out the questions to ask about how to make recess better. Once they had taught the students about survey research methods, the students conducted a survey of other students throughout the school, asking them their ideas about recess and what would make it better. They tallied their data, created displays to share it and then presented their findings to the school administrators. In response to the students' data, some administrators looked into programs such as *Right To Play,* to create a stronger community through play and teach about greater social justice issues; and some administrators provided more games and activities at recess, as a means to engage students in more productive activities during this time and allow more students to feel included.

Artifact 2:

"Diverse student interests and skills determine both the curricular and extra-curricular activities at the school"(P. 26).

Here is an example of an activity from one of the workshops that encourages students to express themselves as a part of the curriculum. Literary devices, poetry writing, oral speaking and community building can all be a focus for this activity.

Who is singing your song? (Adapted from Wagner, 2004)

1. Who is singing your song? What artists/activists/role models would you like to honour? What books/poems/songs say exactly what you want to say? Back up your answers!

Books/poems/songs/films:	Historical figures/activists/role models:
What is the connection to you?	What is the connection to you?

2. You've just listed many forms of art that have influenced who you are. What makes art such a powerful form of expression?

3. Now take the things you have listed and make a poem. Share why you have connected with the things you have written. You can focus on one or many of the ideas written.

4. Try to make the sentences apply only to you, and not to anyone else.

"I have a deeper understanding of what it means to be responsive to a diverse group of students' needs and interests." Participant comment

School Leadership

Artifact 1:

> *"The school has systematic policies and practices in place that help to train and maintain leadership throughout the school"* (p. 37).

A vital focus of this series was to provide guidance for teachers as leaders in their schools. The reason this series had the potential for widespread change is because we always stressed the importance of sharing resources with other teachers in the school. Participants in the series knew that in order to truly affect change in a school, a teacher must be an effective, encouraging leader not just for his/her students, but for other teachers as well. Teachers were encouraged to explore their own interests and think "outside the box" for their work.
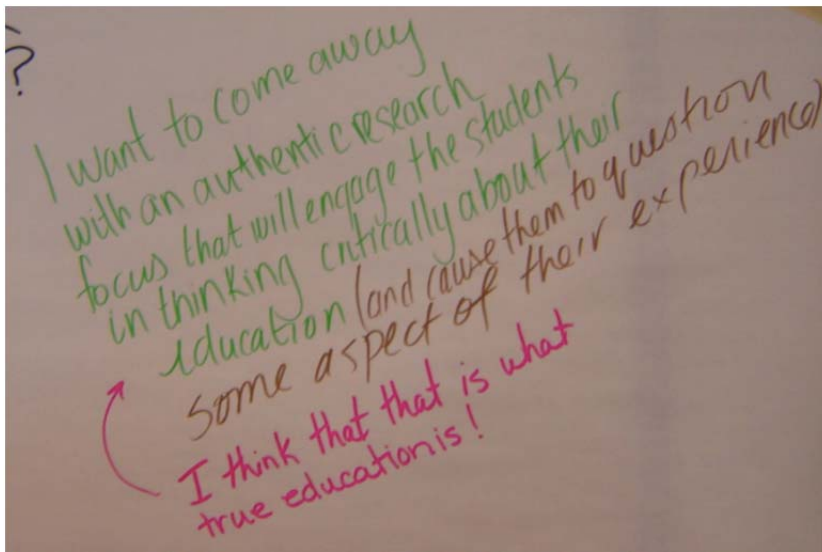
As part of a culminating activity for the session, participants collaborated to put together a PowerPoint presentation of their learning from throughout the series. They then returned to their schools and brought back something to show their colleagues at a staff meeting, sharing potential resources for their professional development.
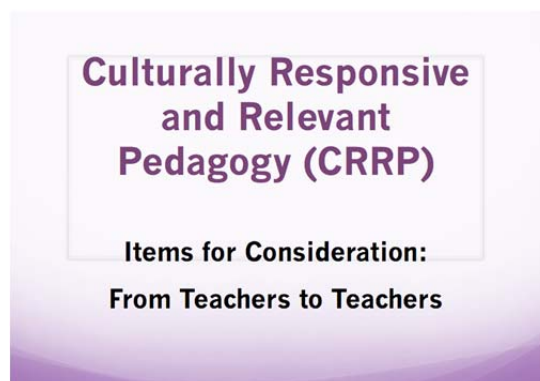
Artifact 2:

*"School staff are supported and encouraged to develop
and provide leadership in different areas"* (p. 38).

Through participating in the series, teachers were supported in being school leaders in addressing challenging/controversial issues in school. As a culminating project in the series, two middle school teachers were inspired to create a video about homophobia with their students. This is an area that many teachers felt discomfort in addressing. The two teachers in the series interviewed students talking about the use of the word "gay", as well as some of their misconceptions of families with same-sex parents. After discussion, sharing, honest and sometimes challenging conversations, students made comics demonstrating why the negative use of the word "gay" is not appropriate.

"When you're taking someone's rights, you always need to think about 'If I was in their place…'"

Grade 8 student in the class of a teacher participant

Community Connections

This tenet recognizes the importance of establishing a connection with the communities to which students and their families belong.

Artifact 1:

"The school has policies and practices in place to ensure that it learns from the knowledge of community agencies and community members who understand the community in ways that the school does not" (p. 39).

George Syme Community School-Mural of the community with 4th grade students writing what they love about their community

Teachers from this school participated over many years in the seminar series.

(This mural was created prior to the current seminar series and is representative of the valuing of community and the types of displays that could be created in schools that demonstrate the intention within this project.)

"I found the group discussions with associate teachers and teacher candidates very interesting because we got to share theory to practice with diverse perspectives." Participant comment
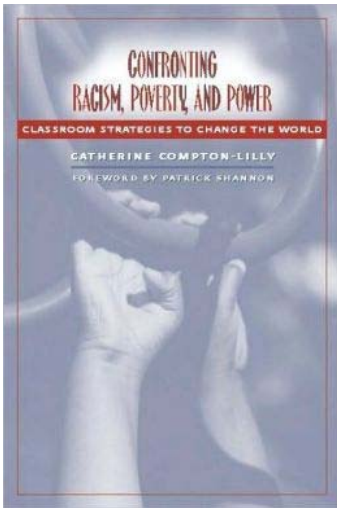
"In our city a number of organizations are working for peace in our community. Representatives from several of these organizations came to speak with the children. One of our guest speakers is a local organizer who became involved with violence prevention when her own son became a victim of violence. She spoke with the students about her own experiences…" (Compton-Lilly, p. 85).

This quotation comes from a chapter of *Confronting Racism, Poverty, and Power* that we read and discussed in one of the workshops with a focus on making community connections and learning from the community.

"Always consider every aspect of a student's life and reflect on your own assumptions and biases in order to properly inform your teaching."

<div align="right">Participant comment</div>

Artifact 2:

"As part of its curriculum, the school ensures open spaces for students to discuss the issues that affect their community, as well as provide opportunities for students to get involved in community advocacy"(p. 41).
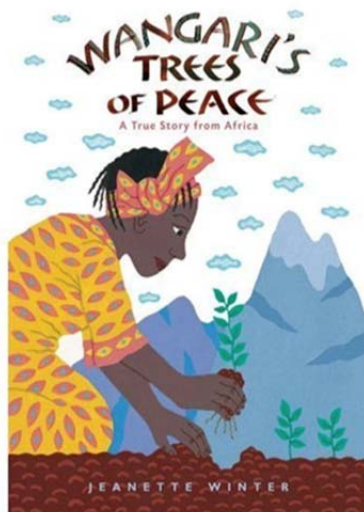
Reading about Wangari Mathai's experiences as an environmental and human rights activist allowed students opportunities to explore the relationship between **personal and community empowerment.** Students are learning to **assert their voices in ways that increase others' awareness and desire to take action.**

Family/Caregiver-School Relations

In the course of their professional development, it is important for educators to examine some of their preconceived notions about the families of the students they teach. They must work from the assumption that all families want what is best for their children and follow through by valuing the input of students' families.

Artifact 1:

"The school honours family/caregivers as an educational resource by valuing their personal and/or professional knowledge of their children" (p. 29).

One important focus of the CRRP sessions was on the negative impact of deficit thinking. Throughout the series, deficit thinking is defined as "an approach through which scholars explain varying levels of opportunity and access among groups of people by identifying deficits in the cultures and behaviours" (Gorski, p. 8). Participants learned to foster an "asset-based approach" to families, in which cultural differences are valued and not seen as deficiencies. This involves believing that all families have strengths, they all care about their children, and that they are all doing the best they can.

Here are some of the commonly held beliefs that participants grappled with:

1. Low income families do not value education.

2. Parents in low income communities need to learn parenting skills.

3. People in poverty have a poor work ethic which carries over to their children.

Participants were then asked what one has to ignore in order to buy into these beliefs and misconceptions. This started a powerful conversation about why teachers often view low-income, racialized and historically marginalized families the way they do.

"Starting with the big picture of mindset/myths/deficit thinking helps to set the tone…for equity. I understand why this is important and how it starts with my thinking as a teacher." Participant comment

Artifact 2:

"The school recognizes the socio-political events that shape family/caregiver involvement, such as changes in labour laws, housing policies, job restructuring/outsourcing, immigration policies, market fluctuations, etc. Therefore, the school has reasonable and realistic expectations of the family/caregiver time and resources" (p. 34).

In a reflection by a teacher candidate, she notes how people outside of the school communities, sometimes teacher themselves, are quick to make assumptions:

"You don't see parents trying to learn English so that they can get a job or help their children with their homework. You don't see families, parents, grandparents, who want nothing more than for their children than to be educated, successful, and loved."

Artifact 3:

Based on the readings within the series, one teacher decided to engage her class in a project that focused on valuing the work of the parents/caregivers in her classroom. She recognized that the pictures in the primary level books did not reflect the kind of jobs her students' families actually worked. Many discussions on occupations in primary classrooms are limited and only value certain types of work and education. Therefore, this teacher asked her kindergarten class to take home a disposable camera and take a picture of someone working, inside of the home or outside of the home. Some parents/caregivers took the cameras to work to get "on the job" photos. The teacher then developed the pictures to make a picture book. Each student contributed one page about someone who loves them and the work that person does daily. After the project, the class had their own book that reflected and honoured their families and the very important work they do in their community.

Culture of Professional Development

The goal of all of these sessions is to encourage a culture of professional development in schools, and to show teachers the importance of being life-long learners.

Artifact 1:

"In schools where teachers have very different life experiences from that of their students, professional development must question the "common sense" assumptions about schooling. This demands a new and different kind of professional development that is focused on learning about the lives of students and their families" (p. 43).

Participants in the series engaged in challenging conversations. They began by examining their social identities as a way of situating themselves in the equity work.

(Handout from Equitable and Inclusive Schools, the Toronto District School Board)

"I need to understand my biases, be open with them and talk about them..."

Participant Comment

Understanding that talking about issues of race, class and other aspects of social identity is difficult, especially when looking at differential academic outcomes for our students, we decided to establish some ground rules for the conversations and used the Four Agreements from Courageous Conversations about Race (Singleton and Linton, 2006). As described in their work, participants should:

1) Stay Engaged: This means not checking out when the conversation becomes challenging but remaining involved and invested even when there is disagreement and discomfort.

2) Speak Your Truth: This means being absolutely honest about your thoughts, feelings and opinions and not what you think others want to hear.

3) Experience Discomfort: Agree to experience discomfort because the topic is uncomfortable and without discomfort we are not pushed to change.

4) Expect and accept non-closure: There is no quick fix to these problems but we must begin, review and move forward. This is an on-going, maybe forever, kind of process. There are no easy answers. We try new things and then review and then try new things again. We learn from the process and from each other in the dialogue.
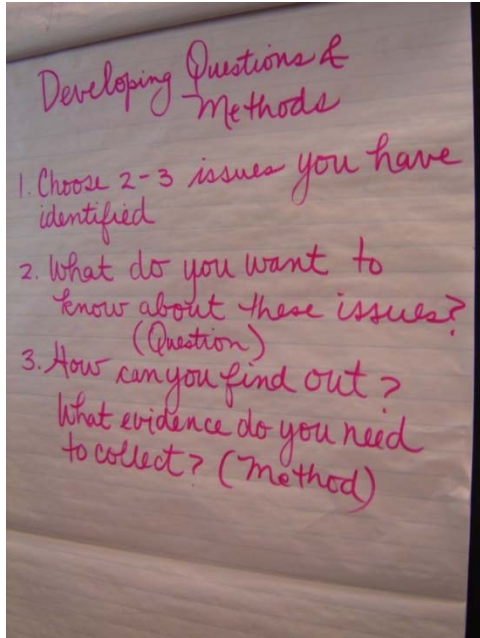
(Singleton & Linton, 2006)

"My mind was opened, and I believe it will forever need to be open and consciously aware of issues of equity – always asking questions."

Participant Comment

Artifact 2:

*"Teachers are encouraged to explore areas of particular relevance to their interests and students' needs, thereby, determining their professional development plans for each school year"* (p. 45).

These photos are from one of the sessions that focused on assessing and planning for professional development needs and determining next steps.

Artifact 3:

"School staff are provided with opportunities for ongoing professional development in equity and social justice education" (p. 46).

Participants were also provided with a resource list to continue their professional development related to many of the equity and social justice issues that were discussed in the series. Some of the suggested texts included the following:
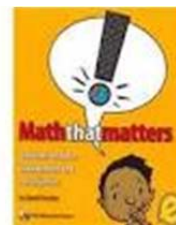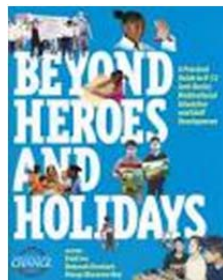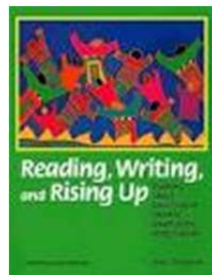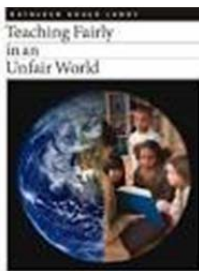
Moving Forward:

Although the series is officially completed, several teachers who participated over the years continue to remain in contact with the Centre and continue to do this equity-focused work. Some of the participants have left their own classrooms, and have engaged in sharing this work at a system level. Others remain in the classroom and other school spaces pushing themselves and their colleagues to be reflective and to continue to engage in practices that support better experiences and outcomes for all of our students in all of our schools. The lessons learned and shared by the Centre and the participants serve as a resource for future professional development, and they provide a catalyst for others to begin to explore or extend this work.

Report Resources

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