

Language Arts February eNews 2019: Culturally Relevant Teaching of English

Former First Lady Michelle Obama spoke about self-determination with a group of sophomores in Washington, D.C. in 2013. Mrs. Obama encouraged students to meaningfully engage in their education. She said, **“the person with the biggest impact on your education is you. It’s that simple. It is you, the student.”**



Most would agree that students impact their level of success; however, there are numerous other factors including **attendance, curriculum, developmental differences, health, racism or classism, parents’ education, parent involvement, school climate, socioeconomic status, and supportive relationships, as well as teacher efficacy and expectations** that also influence student learning.

This is compounded by the fact that as of 2016, 84% of public school teachers were white according to the US Department of Education, yet by 2024, 52% of public school students will be racially and/or ethnically diverse. Currently, 90% of Wego faculty are white, while 62% of West Chicago Community High School students are Hispanic, and an additional ten percent of students are African American, Asian, or biracial. Therefore, an understanding of the factors that hinder student success and ways to address them is critical to increase student learning.

As a result, all Wego faculty participated in **Culturally Relevant Teaching** (CRT) training during the first semester of the 2018-2019 school year. Based on the work of University of Wisconsin professor Gloria Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant or responsive teaching utilizes student-centered teaching methods to support equity and excellence while **“VALIDAT[ING] AND AFFIRM[ING] THE EXPERIENCES AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF STUDENTS FROM ALL CULTURES AND BACKGROUNDS.”** (See [Samuels, Samuels, and Cook.](#))

“The key to culturally relevant teaching is teachers creating meaningful and engaging connections between students’ home and school lives.”

- Megan Adams, Sanjuana Rodriguez & Kate Zimmer in Ed Week Teacher

Culturally Relevant teacher training at WCCHS was led by **Nick Kempski, District 94 AVID teacher** and site coordinator. AVID, an acronym for Advancement Via Individual Determination, is the largest college readiness program in the US. AVID strives to “improve the academic preparation and performance of all students, especially those who are underrepresented in higher education institutions.” AVID utilizes CRT to help educators build

meaningful relationships with students, empower students, establish high expectations for all, as well as respect students' cultures and experiences, while utilizing their assets.

CRT echoes 21st century best practice teacher, which focuses on **student-centered teaching** rather than a teacher-driven classroom. Professor Ladson-Billings' philosophy on CRT is based-upon student-centered pedagogy, which Brown University synthesizes into seven components:

[Positive perspectives on parents and families](#)

[Communication of high expectations](#)

[Learning within the context of culture](#)

[Student-centered instruction](#)

[Culturally mediated instruction](#)

[Reshaping the curriculum](#)

[Teacher as facilitator](#)



AVID Culturally Relevant Teaching training at Wego

introduced faculty to strategies designed to build their capacity as educators.

Teachers can actively focus on **building relationships** with students by proactively creating and vigilantly maintaining a safe classroom climate. Two AVID strategies include creating a “human number line” that enables students to identify one another’s similarities, strengths and interests by rating themselves on a variety of statements. Students could consider innocuous comments such as “I can cook my family’s favorite and/or traditional foods” in conjunction with reading chapter 1 in *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck when the main characters, who are migrant workers, endure the Great Depression, and suffer by eating only beans. Other students may identify with the statement, “I can’t turn on the oven!” A third group may agree that “I can make follow directions to make something from a box or the freezer.” This quick community builder enables students and teachers to learn something about each other’s experiences in connection to examining characterization in the text.

AVID encourages classes further build relationships and a positive classroom climate by considering the difference between conflict and bullying. Whether they examine scenarios, complete a Venn diagram, draft a journal response, or write an extended definition, students can strengthen relationships within the classroom by articulating the meaning of these terms in conjunction with a core class text. While reading the *Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, which examines integrity and

redemption, English 1 and English 1 Honors students can better understand one another's experiences and compare them to those of the protagonist and antagonist.

CRT training through AVID also highlights the need to **empower student voice**. Two methods to inspire student leadership and advocacy are an examination of growth and fixed mindsets, as well as evaluation of the role of language registers. Stanford professor Carol Dweck identified two "mindsets" in her book of the same name. Those with a growth mindset believe that growth and learning are always possible through effort and constructive failure. Others with a fixed mindset avoid risk and believe that change and growth are not possible, rather one's intelligence is fixed not malleable.

A Culturally Relevant classroom exposes students to this dichotomy, asks them to evaluate their own mindset, and discusses how students and adults can develop a growth mindset - if they do not already have one. Activities such as sorting manipulatives with growth and fixed mindsets statements on them provide students with a scaffold for self-evaluation. Statements such as, "I love a challenge" and "I am afraid of failing" represent growth and fixed mindsets respectively. Analysis of beliefs like these through a variety of methods demystifies the way individuals think and feel about change, challenge, and learning. Students define, summarize, apply, and evaluate mindset throughout their English coursework in District 94.

Similarly, an examination of slang, informal, and formal language can legitimate all language registers in the appropriate context and teach students how to "code switch," or use appropriate language based upon the setting and audience. Analyzing songs, poems, and non-fiction written in a variety of dialects and registers offers a framework for understanding the power of language, as well as the procedures for using language effectively. This can also be paired with vocabulary study, particularly the use of vocabulary squares based upon Robert Marzano's research and pedagogy. English 1 students learn conceptual vocabulary using Marzano squares in each unit in an effort to expand their background knowledge and develop their reading, speaking, and writing vocabulary.

Holding high expectations and respecting experiences are also critical components of the AVID Culturally Relevant Teaching that district teachers completed in February. (These component will be discussed in the language arts March eNews.)

The power of education is undisputed. In 2003, activist Nelson Mandela spoke on the topic in Johannesburg, South Africa. Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can

use to change the world.” Culturally Relevant Teaching is one means to improving education and society.