Operationalizing Relationality for Thrivance

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Abstract

Within this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*, the authors examined asset-based ideologies and approaches, classroom-based global collaboration, and teachers of color resilience through relationships. This article is a response to those articles and poses the questions: Where can we find remnants of hope, healing, justice, and new tomorrows, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty? How does relationality articulate solutions and insight for thrivance?

Introduction

When thinking about our current context of racial injustice, a global health pandemic, and the continued impacts of climate change, we are remiss to think that the causes, impacts, and outcomes are disconnected from our classrooms and schools. Schools are social institutions built on the ideals and values of the status quo and are implicitly and explicitly complicit with perpetuating social phenomena and ills. Within our schools, by intent or default, exist historic and contemporary belief systems, practices, structures, and policies that exclude, oppress, wound, and/

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or reproduce inequity. Our schools are containers where educators, students, and communities show up with their lived experiences, histories, and material conditions. I am highly reflective about the systemic oppressive conditions and experiences that shape the lives of Black, Indigenous, People of Color communities. I am highly reflective about how this shows up in schools during these unprecedented times, how it manifests in educator belief systems about communities of color, how it impacts the lives of teachers of color, how it exerts influence on interactions and relationships, and how it lives in the holistic being of students. I continue to be reflective about how root causes are overlooked as our school system struggles to respond to the many sociological and ecological challenges unique to our times.

These larger reflections are not new, and nor is the unwavering commitment and fight for an educational system where all students are thriving, not simply surviving (Love, B., 2019). People, organizations, and social movements continue to reconceptualize schooling and have effectively operationalized various frameworks rooted in humanization, love, liberation, and new tomorrows. *La Cultura Cura* (LCC) Transformational Learning (Medina & Tello, 2021), for example, is a culturally rooted, healing centered, and justice oriented schooling framework. It offers ancestral wisdom—the teaching that within individuals, families, and communities exist cultural values, traditions and Indigenous practices that promote natural pathways, healthy development, community safety and lifelong well-being (Tello, 2018). LCC Transformational Learning counters the historical foundations of public schooling designed to fuel assimilation, meritocracy, deficit ideologies, and punitive carcerality while centering four principles: (1) a sense of welcoming and belonging; (2) sacred purpose; (3) culture; and (4) healing centered spaces. At its core, Transformational Learning centralizes relationality—the teaching and understanding that all forms of life are in sacred interconnection.

Relationality, through Indigenous worldviews, acknowledges the deep understanding that all living things are in ethical relations with other people, plants and animals, ancestors, and the natural world. Relationality ensures the thrivance (more than survival) of our ecological and sociological future, connecting all of us in the vast web of life. *Mitákuye Oyás'in*—all are related—reflects the concept of relationality by the Lakota people of North America. This concept of interconnectedness serves as a reminder that all life is sacred to our multidimensional existence, extending through time and space. This ancestral epistemology and ontology surfaces in the Mayan concept of *in lak'ech*,once incorporated into a poem by Luis Valdez , to invoke the concept of vibrant being meaning that we are all part of the same universal vibration. Relationality also comes to life in the Nguni Bantu (Sub Saharan Africa) term of *Ubuntu,* meaning humanity and often translated as, *I am because we are and we are because I am*. Or the Filipino concept of personhood, *Kapwa*, recognizing our shared identity and the inner self that is communal with others. This brief list of ancestral concepts is only a starting point to reflect the universal understanding and way of life that "has less to do with striving for individualism and more to do with establishing connections and understanding ourselves in relationship to all things around us" (Bergstrom, Cleary, & Peacock, 2003, p. 26).

Teaching, learning, and education by nature are relational. Relationships exist in complex ways, some including: teacher with self, student with self, teacher with content, student with content, teacher with place and time, student with place and time, teacher with student, student with students, teacher with community, student with community, etc. Despite the inherent nature of relationships that exist within the context of schooling, there is no guarantee of relationality. In fact, schools are highly transactional spaces that focus on exchanges geared towards individual short-term results, productivity, and in some cases, the sole attainment of knowledge and behavioral skills. Transactional situations have functional relevance for a consumerist and capitalistic society, however transactional mentalities and environments do not nurture deep connections and attunement, so needed in today's schools.

Relationality, as an epistemological and ontological process, requires a re-socialization of how we understand the world and how we walk on the Earth. To embed relationality into teaching and learning will not occur through standardized instructional scripts, scope and sequence curricula, or train-and-hope models of professional development. Although relationality is deeply rooted in Indigenous worldviews, it extends to all of us, especially during this time of ongoing crisis and uncertainty.

> My ancestors….accumulated networks of meaningful, deep, fluid, intimate collective and individual relationships of trust. In times of hardship, we did not rely to any great degree on accumulated capital or individualism but on the strength of relationships with others. (Simpson, 2017, p. 77)

How do we look to the articles found within this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* for remnants of hope, healing, justice, and new tomorrows, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty? How does relationality surface as a theme and how does it articulate solutions and insight for thrivance?

Asset-Based Approaches and Multiethnic, Multilinguistic, Multicultural and Social Justice Experiences

In direct contrast to relationality is deficit thinking, the notion that individuals and their families (particularly low income and minoritized) are inherently incapable of learning due to deficiencies that obstruct the learning process (i.e.. limited intelligence, lack of motivation, and inadequate home socialization) (Valencia, 1997). Much of this ideology and rhetoric in the United States can be traced back to the colonial period as Indigenous people were perceived as less human. Deficit thinking continued through periods of enslavement where early racist discourses set the stage for hereditarian thought and the development of a pseudo-science on intelligence inferiority. Through time, deficit thinking has been cemented into schooling with a perpetuance that school failure is associated with students, families, and communities. "The most common understanding of school failure among low income children of color, and the one deeply embedded in the individual consciousness of teachers, scholars, and policy makers, 'blames the victim'" (Valencia, 1997, p. 48). Deficit thinking disconnects us from others and while teachers are not to blame for the perpetuance of deficit thinking and the reproduction of educational inequities, teachers have the capacity to "redefine roles and explore ways to serve as change agents for school-wide reform" (Garcia & Guerra, 2004, p. 155).

Kevin Murry, Shabina Kavimandan, Socorro G. Herrera, and Melissa Holmes, through their phenomenological research on biography driven instruction (BDI), illuminate the implications of a practice that explicitly counters deficit thinking specific to culturally and linguistically diverse students. These authors ask, "To what extent are educators identifying and maximizing these assets that students bring to the ecology of learning in pre-K-12 schools?" They further argue that culturally and linguistically diverse students bring rich, untapped biopsychosocial histories to the classroom- funds of knowledge, experience, and learning that are regularly under maximized in school settings. Murray, Kavimandan, Herrera, and Holmes point to recent and emergent studies noteworthy in drawing relationships between asset-maximizing pedagogy and the positive outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students and their teachers (Byrd, 2016; Frye, Button, Kelly, & Button, 2010; MacDonald, Miller, Murray, Herrera, & Spears, 2013).

BDI, as an asset-maximizing pedagogy, builds upon four interrelated dimensions of student biographies (academic, linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural); this encompasses the learner's primary socialization in the home and other influences such as family, religion, culture, school, funds of knowledge, ways of knowing, and culture-bound ways of processing and utilizing information. Murray, Kavimandan, Herrera, and Holmes' study offers insights about teacher implementations of BDI and findings further validate a socio-constructivist, culturally responsive perspective on teaching and learning to maximize the multidimensional assets and potential of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Natalie Keefer and Michelle Haj-Broussard similarly deal with the construct of shifting deficit ideologies to asset-based perspectives. Their study examines the impacts of a social justice curriculum on the development of critical consciousness, as well as its influence on educator's deficit/asset-based language. The study seeks to address teacher education programs and their effectiveness in providing space for white, middle class teachers to examine the roots of their assumptions about students of color and students who are experiencing poverty. Keefer and Haj-Broussard found that some participants became defensive when exposed to the ideas presented in the social justice curriculum or they struggled to process the asset-based literature. Overall findings from the study indicate that graduate education majors' deficit discourse about students of color and students experiencing poverty can be changed with asset-based and social justice curriculum, but equally important participants still struggle with resistance, dissonance, and subjective anecdotal evidence towards asset-based discourse.

M. Kate York and Rebecca Hite, in their article "Preservice Science and Mathematics Teachers Intent to Use Classroom-Based Global Collaboration (CBGC) in Their Future Classrooms," tap into the concept of relationality by reminding about the importance of incorporating global education elements into K-12 classrooms because of its capacity to foster cultural awareness, multicultural perspectives, empathy building, environmental protection, and the promotion of sustained interaction, discourse, and collaboration between individuals around the world. Their study follows pre-service teachers and their exposure and intent to use CBGC as a pedagogical approach. Findings indicate that the benefits they personally experienced from the collaborations, coupled with the perceived benefits of including global collaboration activities for their future students, contribute to favorable responses from almost all participants. Additionally, the participants express interest in global collaboration, however fewer than half indicate strong intentions to implement this pedagogy within their future classrooms for a variety of reasons.

Relationality also surfaced in Lina Darwich's article on teachers of color (TOCs). In this study, Darwich illuminates the criticality of relationships for TOCs with family, mentors, and peers. The author reminds us that more than half of the students in American schools are students of color, yet most of their teachers are white. TOCs make up less than 20% of the teaching body, and lower numbers are not a recruitment problem but rather a failure to retain them (Geiger, 2018). Not all teachers leave the profession, as some stay and cope with stressors of racism, racial microaggressions, and alienation. At the heart of the study, relationships with family, mentors, and peers while intertwined with an understanding of race, racism, and a commitment to social justice were instrumental in creating experiences of reciprocity where TOCs feel seen, heard, valued, and where they are inspired to work collectively with other educators to undo unjust systems. Darwich's findings reinforce Jordan's (2006) claim that courage is created in connection with others and that relationships are at the heart of growth, healthy resistance, and resilience. Darwich concluded that it is a lens of critical race theory coupled with relationships that explains TOCs ability to persist, speak their truths, not to give up when their abilities are questioned, and to build a healthy resistance to racism.

Conclusion

Despite the variety of topics found throughout the articles in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*, relationality offers a bridge to connect the articles together, as well as a bridge to connect to our times of crisis and uncertainty. Although relationality is not an explicit construct mentioned by the authors and nor are the ideological and political dimensions of relationality explored, there is ample discussion alluding to ethical responsibility, reciprocity, respect, and relationships within the context of teaching and learning. If it is racial injustice, global health pandemics, environmental degradation, deficit ideologies, teachers of color isolation and alienation, or classroom experiences that exclude the funds of knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse students, relationality offers a capacity for thrivance. Relationality reminds us that everything is part of this vast web of life and our connectedness to each other is the heartbeat of existence.

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