**REFEREED ARTICLE**

# Cultural Proficiency Frameworks Analysed Through the Lens of Liberation Pedagogy

**Andrew Collins**

***Abstract***

*While often used with the most noble of intentions, Cultural Proficiency Frameworks (CPFs) do not sufficiently challenge underlying power-dynamics or address societal inequalities. Those of disadvantageous social standing, who are outside the perceived norm, benefit from CPFs, but not to an extent that changes their underlying status within Canada. Liberation pedagogy provides a theoretical framework for analysing the dynamics of CPF as they relate to hegemonic repression and cultural reproduction. Liberation pedagogy goes beyond CPFs' improvements of existing institutions and educational practices to challenge underlying components of learning and teaching. Through the lens of liberation pedagogy, CPFs can be analysed in terms of theoretical underpinnings, teacher-student relationships, and the purpose of education.*

The espousal of Cultural Proficiency Frameworks (CPF) entails an understanding of school change and educator change as an act that is an "organic, nonlinear process" (CampbellJones, CampbellJones, & Lindsey, 2010, p. 16). It requires an understanding of cultural barriers based upon moral consciousness and metacognition. CPFs, however, do not necessarily take into account over-riding hegemonic power-dynamics. Frameworks addressing the culturally diverse classroom do not sufficiently address inequalities of "social, economic, and political conditions that give a ruling group power over others" (Gutek, 2004, p. 236). They therefore do not necessarily go far enough in addressing the needs of the culturally marginalized such as Canada's Aboriginal populace.

The intentions of CPFs are noble, but they merely bridge cultural divisions instead of directly challenging societal inequalities. The frameworks address the needs of the classroom, but do not impact the wider societal context. As the group that is arguably least served by existing power dynamics, Aboriginal learners may be used as a case study to analyse the effectiveness of each theoretical position. For these learners, CPFs do not facilitate real change, but merely enhance inter-classroom cooperation. They may provide teachers with a way to understand their own cultural biases and the needs of their Aboriginal learners, but they do not provide a way to usurp the power dynamics that repress the Aboriginal populace. The theoretical framework of Freire's liberation pedagogy may be used to analyse CPFs in terms of their theoretical underpinnings, their understanding of student-teacher relations, and their ontology of education's purpose.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

Freire's ideology of liberation pedagogy argues for an education that "frees a person from domination and oppression" (Gutek, 2004, p. 236). The theoretical underpinnings demand a commitment to change on a broader scale. Liberation pedagogy requires a desire for large scale social change and and a consideration of students in their larger societal role. It necessitates a realization of the inequalities and repression, both historic and contemporary, which impact the Aboriginal populations of Canada. Illich maintained that "the process of deinstitutionalization must begin with de-schooling . . . grassroots settings, should create the educational processes that serve them best" (Gutek, 2004, p. 238). The ideology requires a rejection of modern institutions that "actually enrich and empower a few, but dehumanize and impoverish many" (Gutek, 2004, p. 238). The Western Eurocentric educational system is

therefore seen as fundamentally counterproductive to enhancing Aboriginal liberation. Liberation pedagogy acknowledges the contextualism that is predicated upon the idea that society involves significant power dynamics that empower some while disadvantaging others.

CPFs, in contrast to liberation pedagogy, aim to bridge cultural differences and bring equality to existing cultural components. CPFs represent more of a smoothing over of cultural differences - the cracks in society - than a dramatic change in fundamental power dynamics and norms. CPF proponents would have "educators . . . work more successfully with students who represent the many different cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and economic subcultures" (Lindsay, Roberts & CampbellJones, 2005, p. xv). For the Aboriginal populace, this would mean an incorporation of cultural components, without an examination of how the repression of Aboriginal students can be countered.

An understanding of culture comprises "the totality of ideas, beliefs, values, activities, and knowledge of a group or individuals who share historical, geographical, religious, racial, linguistic, ethnic or social traditions" (Davis, 2002, p. 7). The concept of cultural diversity, however, requires an understanding that "no single person can be said to be diverse, culturally or otherwise except in reference to other persons or environments" (Barrera & Corso, 2003, p. 6). Greene (2011) noted that assumptions made by educators can be predicated upon stereotypes. In contrast to liberation pedagogy, many authors of CPFs purport that cultural proficiency is a tool to incorporate a multicultural classroom and a teacher within a framework that benefits both.

Liberation pedagogy would argue, however, that teachers have been co-opted to serve the dominant hegemonic perspective by ignoring the potential liberation of their students. Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2005) described cultural proficiency as "a way of being that enables both individuals and organizations to respond effectively to people who differ from them. Cultural competence is behaviour that is aligned with standards that move an organization or an individual toward culturally proficient interactions" (p. 1). The argument can be made, however, that these incorporations are a beneficial counter that aims to maintain the status quo. By ensuring that some components of minority cultures exist within the classroom, the focus is drawn away from changing the underlying hegemonic domination.

## Student-Teacher Relations

Freire admonished that "teachers can not remain neutral or hide behind a veil of objectivity" (Gutek, 2004, p 240). A teacher is not given the option of a self-deceiving neutral position. The teacher is forced into making a decision between being a tool of further oppression or an agent of liberation for their Aboriginal learners. Potentially, one could argue some concern over the perception of a western educator, raised in a modernist society, enshrining him/herself in a self-concept of a heroic liberator, but the true embracement of liberation pedagogy would ideally move the educator away from older cultural narratives. As Gutek noted, "The goal of Liberation pedagogy is the creation of a new social order. Creating the new world will come from opening the self and society to new possibilities for leading a richer and fuller life" (2004, p. 240). The educator must ultimately decide what role aligns with their concept of morality.

Proponents of CPFs espouse the need for a teacher to create a culturally responsive classroom that facilitates collaboration between teacher and student (Tileston & Darling, 2008). Similarly to liberation pedagogy, the teacher's own cultural biases eliminate the potential for an absolutely objective position. The teacher creates an environment that values the students of different cultural backgrounds as contributors rather than outsiders. An educator using a CPF would infuse cultural components, such as the Seven Sacred Teachings, into the classroom as elements with weighting equal to any other cultural norm. Leadership within the CPF uses information and skills "to avoid unintentional slights or hurts (i.e., micro-aggressions) and to improve the quality of life for school and home communities" (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009,

p. 14). The creation of culturally responsive classrooms must entail a concerted effort by the educator that values student input.

For educators, providing students with a culturally and linguistically diverse education is a "tangible representation of professional collaboration" (Lewis, Rivera & Roby, 2012, p. ix). The teachers' goal is to enrich their students' lives by establishing positive teacher-student relationships. An educator of Aboriginal students would not focus on the wider societal challenges, but merely the challenges within the classroom. Fogel (1998) argued that the guiding principles of improving student-teacher relationships include that "communication illuminates the self's relationship to others . . . communication that leads to renewed self-understanding is a creative co-construction of the participants" (p. 11). The goal is not to liberate the student, but rather to ensure the best possible education and communication pathway within the existing hegemonic dynamic.

## Education's Purpose

Freire's liberation pedagogy argues that "it is possible, indeed necessary, to challenge the status quo and bring about humanizing institutional, social, political, economic, and educational change" (Gutek, 2004, p. 238). This change requires the ability to think critically and empower students to "penetrate through the ideological mists of false consciousness" (Gutek, 2004, p. 242). For Aboriginal learners, this critical meta-cognition would enable them to examine the cultural hegemony being imposed upon them. They could examine the importance of text and the tools used to re-create power dynamics. The cultural biases within the material and potentially within the educator would lead to a greater understanding of inequalities within society. The historical abuses and political dynamics that have led to the oppression of Aboriginal peoples and their counter-reactions to Eurocentric educational models can be examined in light of the Manitoba curriculum that students are expected to learn as doctrine.

In comparison, Lindsey, Jungwirth, Paulh, and Lindsey (2009) explored an idea of education around focusing on "valuing diversity, an essential element of cultural competence, and its interaction with the tenets of learning communities" (p. 76). This education is centred on culturally proficient learning communities that examine cultural competencies among staff. Collaborating and confronting inequalities facilitate an analysis of poverty's role in education. The goal is not to change the hegemonic power dynamic, but rather to elevate those ensconced in poverty to a position of upward mobility. These ideas work to expel myths around poverty and inadequate solutions used to close the achievement gap, but they do not change the underlying society (Tileston & Darling, 2009). Quezada, Lindsey, and Lindsey (2012) indicated that "adapting to diversity is about making a commitment to have diversity be a central tenet of . . . substance" (p. 100). CPFs offer a way to adapt to the wider realities of a changing society – not to change society to adapt to the needs of the marginalized.

## Conclusion

When viewed through the lens of liberation pedagogy, CPFs can be found lacking in their end goal. It is not that usage of CPFs is negative, but merely that it is a stop-gap solution when a larger alteration is necessary. Many challenges, both cultural and societal, are commonly recognized by both liberation pedagogy and CPFs. Liberation pedagogy results in a change in power dynamics, but CPFs merely temper these dynamics within a classroom or school. The underlying ideological beliefs differ in the scope of change that is envisioned. The teacher-student dynamic is critical in the ontologies proposed by liberation pedagogy and CPFs.

While CPFs implore metacognition to examine cultural biases and modify cultural interactions, liberation pedagogy views teachers as potential catalysts for societal change. Teachers liberate students' thought processes as they examine their place within the existing power dynamic. The goal of education itself differs between CPFs and liberation pedagogy.

CPFs aim to improve the existing power dynamic and increase the input from differing cultural sources. Liberation pedagogy uses the classroom to challenge the power dynamic. While both seek to ensure that change exists, the scope of change is dramatically different. For Aboriginal learners, CPFs are simply not adequate to address the needs that exist within such a large scale.

## References


CampbellJones, F., CampbellJones, F., & Lindsey, R., (Eds.) (2010). *The cultural proficiency journey: Coving beyond ethical barriers toward profound school change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Davis, B. (2012). *How to teach students who don't look like you: Culturally responsive teaching strategies.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Fogel, A. (1991). *Developing through relationships*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Greene, G. (2011). *Transition planning for culturally and linguistically diverse youth*. London, UK: Paulh Brookes.

Gutek, G. (2004). *Liberation pedagogy*. In G. Gutek (Ed.), Philosophical and ideological voices in education. Toronto , ON: Pearson.

Leiws, L., Rivera, A., & Roby, R. (2012). *Identifying & serving culturally and linguistically diverse gifted students*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Lindsey, D., Jungwirth, L., Pahl, J., & Lindsey, R. (2009). *Culturally proficient learning communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lindsey, R., Karns, M., & Myatt, K. (2010). *Culturally proficient education: An asset-based response to conditions of poverty*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lindsey, R., Roberts, L,, & CampbellJones, F. (2005). *The culturally proficient school: An implementation guide for school leaders.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lindsey, R., Robins, K., & Terrell, R. (2009). *Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lindsey, R., Robins, K., Terrell, R. (2005). *Facilitator's guide: Cultural proficiency a manual for school leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Quezada, R., Lindsey, D., & Lindsey, R. (2012). *Culturally proficient practice: Supporting educators of English learning students.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Rothstein-Fisch, C., & Trumbull, E. (2008). *Managing diverse classrooms.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Stephens, D., Lindsey, R. (2011) *Culturally proficient collaboration: Use and misuse of school counsellors.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Tileston, D., & Darling, S. (2009). *Closing the poverty & culture gap: Strategies to reach every student*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Tileston, D., & Darling, S. (2008). *Why culture counts: Teaching children of poverty.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.


### *About the Author*


*Andrew J. Collins is currently completing his Master of Education degree in special education at Brandon University. He is a vice-principal and resource teacher with Mountain View School Division. He is married and a father of two.*