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Creating Mirrors: Expanding Frameworks to Explore Immigrant Students' Agentive Authoring
of Identity

By:
Neisha Young
Drexel University
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Supervising Professor:
Dr. Christopher Wright

Editors:

Dr. Penny L. Hammrich
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Dr. Rajashi Ghosh
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Copy Editor:

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Abstract

Immigration contributes to the increasing diversity represented in US classrooms. The need to support immigrant students' identities has generated much research, leading to the call for students to be provided with texts that mirror their cultural identities. However, the reality is that we cannot provide mirrors for all the intersecting identities present in our classrooms. I, therefore, aim to build on the established frameworks by exploring how the use of a conceptual tool, the Critical Cultural Identity Tool (CCIT), can provide pedagogical strategies to equip students to craft their own mirrors.

Aim

This research brief provides an overview of my current research agenda, where I am aiming to explore how the use of a developing conceptual framework can contribute to the development of pedagogical strategies to support immigrant students' authoring of their own mirrors, when texts negate or (mis)represent them.

Problem

The United States of America (US) has more than 44.9 million immigrants from over 200 countries, who speak hundreds of languages, and have a robust mix of cultures (Immigration Data and Statistics, 2021). In light of this, much discussion has centered on the nature of the student diversity represented in US classrooms. Integral to this discussion has been the argument that classrooms need to recognize, reflect, and celebrate immigrant students' multifaceted cultural identities by providing them with texts to which they can relate (Caraballo, 2017; Bishop, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lopez-Robertson, 2017). This need is supported by research that suggests that cultural representation is important (Caraballo, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2014; Umana-Taylor et al., 2018), and our culturally diverse students need to see themselves and their cultures in the texts that they read. In her influential essay *'Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors'* Bishop (1990) argued that,

> When children cannot find themselves in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted...they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in society, [therefore] our classrooms need to be places where all the children from all the cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors. (Bishop, 1990, p. 1).

Ladson-Billings (1995) further impacted this conversation, by asserting the need for teachers to practice culturally relevant pedagogy by improving their cultural competence when engaging with diverse students.
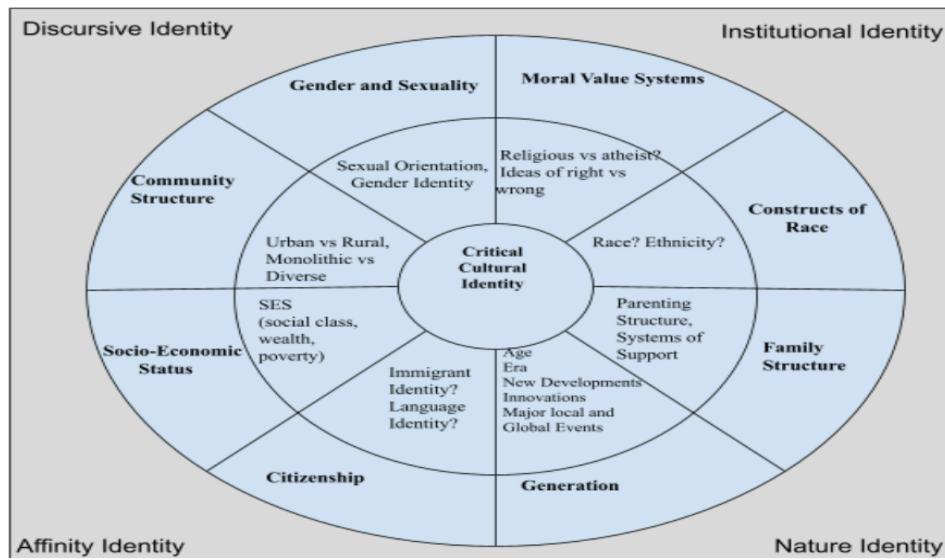
The corpus of research articulated by Bishop and Ladson-Billings is nothing short of ground-breaking, as their work has led to crucial developments in policy and praxis and has positively influenced the educational experiences of culturally diverse students both here in the US and globally. Many districts now curate workshops and professional development seminars

geared at fostering cultural competence within their teachers, and more and more classrooms now feature books written by authors of color with multicultural characters. However, while some books may offer mirrors to some children, those mirrors may be warped for others, may reinforce stereotypes, or may exclude other children entirely (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2019; Umana-Taylor et al., 2018). Also, the multiplicity of identities represented in classrooms are in a constant state of 'becoming', as students grow, explore, and change. Consequently, instead of creating spaces of empowerment, what often results when educators offer texts with mirrors, is the creation of essentialized spaces where students with multicultural identities are unintentionally stereotyped, and the subtle nuances and intersections of their evolving cultural identities are negated (Gee, 2000; Gillborn, 2015). There is therefore a need for a continued expansion of ways to support students' unique and diverse multifaceted identities (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2019; Umana-Taylor et al., 2018). My research responds to this call by building upon the foundations established by Bishop and Ladson-Billings to explore pedagogical strategies that can contribute to the transformation of classrooms from spaces that seek mainly to mirror and support identity, into spaces that provide agentive opportunities for identities to be explored, problematized, countered, and authored in authentic ways.

Research Exploration: The Critical Cultural Identity Tool (CCIT)

In assessing this need for continued expansion of the ways in which we support student identity in our culturally diverse classrooms, I pose the following overarching questions: since we cannot provide mirrors for all the various intersecting identities in our classrooms, how do we find pedagogical ways to support students' development of their own mirrors? How can these new pedagogical strategies deepen our theoretical understanding of the identity processes in which immigrant students engage? These questions have led to the conceptualization of the Critical Cultural Identity Tool (CCIT). The CCIT, pictured below, is a pedagogical tool that I am in the process of exploring and refining, and it is predicated upon the framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 2017; Gillborn, 2015; Hill-Collins & Bilge, 2016) and Gee's four types of identities (Gee, 2000). As a critical pedagogical tool, the CCIT is geared at focusing the conversation on the different facets of students' identities and how they interact in broader societal contexts. The CCIT is in its initial phase of development, and the goal is to continue to develop and refine it through an iterative multi-year research agenda.

Fig. 1 Critical Cultural Identity Tool

Discursive Identity | Institutional Identity

Gender and Sexuality

Moral Value Systems

Community Structure

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity

Religious vs atheist? Ideas of right vs wrong

Constructs of Race

Urban vs Rural, Monolithic vs Diverse

Critical Cultural Identity

Race? Ethnicity?

SES (social class, wealth, poverty)

Parenting Structure, Systems of Support

Socio-Economic Status

Family Structure

Immigrant Identity? Language Identity?

Age Era New Developments Innovations Major local and Global Events

Citizenship

Generation

Affinity Identity | Nature Identity

Looking Ahead

The application of intersectionality as a framework for understanding the cultural diversity present in US classrooms highlights the need for critical pedagogical strategies that can accommodate explorations and affirmation of immigrant students' evolving narratives of self. The CCIT has the potential to be positioned as one such critical pedagogical strategy that can equip culturally diverse students to use their intersectional identities to create their own mirrors, while deepening our theoretical understanding of what the identity-authoring process is like for immigrant students. As I continue to develop and refine the CCIT, my aim is to explore various elements of the tool, to assess how each element might prove instrumental in achieving the overarching goals. To that end, I plan to spend the next three years focusing first on the intersection of discursive identity and immigrant status. Some of the questions I am currently grappling with include: In what ways does the CCIT as a pedagogical tool influence immigrant students' discursive agency in countering identity narratives that (mis)represent and/or negate them? What prevailing identity facets do immigrant students draw upon as they use the CCIT to author authentic narratives of self in response to texts that do not mirror their identities?

Implications

The CCIT holds rich potential to add to the conversation surrounding critical pedagogy for culturally diverse students. It offers the possibility of advancing theoretical understanding concerning immigrant students and the processes that they employ as they navigate their shifting identities within the context of educational spaces. It also holds the promise of expanding upon Bishop's and Ladson-Billings' scholarship by articulating a research-based framework that makes room for greater student agency in interpreting and crafting representation. As it relates to practice, the CCIT bears the possibility of providing educators, especially those in ELA classrooms, with a critical culturally-focused strategy that can complement their efforts to provide students with mirrors. I am excited about these potential contributions as I continue to

research and refine my conceptual framework, and I look forward to the insights and conversations that my work will generate in the coming years.

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Author Biography

Neisha Terry Young is a PhD in Education Leadership and Policy student at Drexel University. She has over 12 years of experience as a middle and high school English educator in Jamaica and the United States. She holds a teaching diploma from Shortwood Teachers College in Jamaica, a

BA in English from Georgia State University (summa cum laude), and an MA in English from Southern New Hampshire University. Her research examines the intersectional identities of Black immigrant students and explores ways in which policy, curriculum, and pedagogy can be influenced to support immigrant students' multifaceted identities in agentive ways.