

I For “KEEPS”: Empowering Student Educators’ Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Classroom Practices

Julie M. Milner,
Helena Fisher,
Joe Melendez,
and Teeyana
Thomas

Abstract

To close the equity gap in our urban students’ academic achievement, educators must be well-versed in critical values. KEEPS, an acronym for knowledge, enquiry, empathy, pluralism and social commitment, is utilized in the Teaching and Learning Department on the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University to empower educators of urban students to implement culturally responsive and sustaining education (CR-SE) practices in their classrooms. The KEEPS values provide student educators with the tools they need to work to the KEEPS claims, which are designed to be universal so that any educator who chooses to embrace them can become more culturally responsive in a manner that values and celebrates their students’ cultural identities and backgrounds. The KEEPS framework provides a solid foundation in CR-SE pedagogical practices and assists educators in reflecting on their teaching identities and work in the classroom. When educators integrate and implement the KEEPS framework, it helps them to remove the systemic barriers faced by their struggling learners. The KEEPS claims, which are designed to operationalize the domains of knowledge, enquiry, empathy, pluralism, and social commitment, are universal so that any educator who chooses to embrace them can become more culturally responsive in their own practice.

Keywords: culturally responsive and sustaining education (CR-SE), teacher education, positive student-teacher relationships, positive academic outcomes

Introduction

The nation’s education system is failing our urban children of color. When I (Milner) was in law school nearly two decades ago, the original [Schott Report](#) sounded the alarm about the crisis of Black male students in education.¹ They not only were far behind in all measures, but they also were fueling what is now referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline. One stark example from the report was that 10% of the nation’s Black male students were located in Chicago and New York City, cities in which 70% of Black students failed to graduate high school (Holzman, 2004, p. 4). Nearly two decades later, not much has changed. In fact, with the need to rely on remote learning due to COVID-19, the equity gap has worsened. This is a national emergency and human rights issue that must finally be addressed.

In March 2018, Mayor Bill De Blasio appointed Richard Carranza to be the New York City schools chancellor. Carranza implemented an agenda of equity and excellence that mandated implicit bias training for all staff members. Then COVID-19 hit and derailed this important effort to achieve equity and excellence for the city’s 1.1 million students (New York City Department of Education, 2020). Neither the mayor nor the chancellor had an effective plan in place for the transition to remote learning, so teachers were left to scramble to meet their students’ learning needs. To the chancellor’s credit, he was able to supply 231,000 students with iPads that had a data plan, but as of this writing, 225,000 more were still waiting for devices (Edelman, 2020). The mayor announced in early 2020 that all homeless shelters would be equipped with internet in order to support the 114,000 students who reside there; however, this was not implemented until spring 2021 (Coalition for the Homeless, 2020). The unique challenges created by COVID-19 opened uncharted territory for education researchers and practitioners to determine best practices. While the crisis provided opportunities to try new strategies, it is imperative to ground them in what has already been proven.

Empathy as the Key to CR-SE

Twenty years after the Schott Report, we are still seeking ways to close the equity gaps so that all children can achieve excellence in education. Teacher empathy is the key to building strong relationships with urban students. Strong student-teacher relationships improve outcomes such as attendance, retention, grades, test scores, and college-readiness. However, there is a gap in the research on the development of empathy among teachers. A literature review on the subject failed to find methods in teacher preparation programs that operationalize empathy for urban students (Warren, 2018). The KEEPS values we instill in our student educators at Long Island University (LIU) do just this.

The teacher education program on LIU's Brooklyn campus is centered on helping student educators develop empathy for their students, which is a crucial component of culturally relevant education. In this paper, we explore how LIU teaches empathy as a CR-SE pedagogical concept and how we operationalize it through KEEPS.

Making Empathy Culturally Responsive

Strong student-teacher relationships are rooted in empathy (Milner, 2007; Warren, 2018) and result in positive outcomes for students of color, such as higher grades, lower dropout rates, improved test scores, and lower suspension rates (Decker & Christenson, 2007). In fact, strong student-teacher relationships can mitigate the disparities stemming from socioeconomic status, trauma, poor nutrition, environmental toxins, and a lack of maternal bonding (Decker & Christenson, 2007).

Culturally responsive educators who show empathy for their students are able to connect with the social and historical contexts of students' experiences and thus to understand and accept each student as a whole and complex being (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Noddings, 2012). The teacher who shows empathy is "simply listening, holding space, withholding judgment, emotionally connecting and communicating that incredibly healing message of 'You're not alone'" (Brown, 2015, p. 54). Noddings (2012) describes it as learning to "feel" what the other is going through or something congruent with the other's feelings" (p. 775). Delpit (2012) sees empathy as the key to students' success: "When students believe that the teacher cares for them and is concerned about them, they will frequently rise to the expectations set" (p. 82). However, it is not enough for students to know that they are cared for; they also must be taught to have empathy toward those around them (Noddings, 2012). Ladson-Billings (2009) notes that caring teachers are better able to empower their students to tackle social problems that affect their community.

Many scholars write about empathy, but few have operationalized it in a way that specifically serves Black and Brown learners (Warren, 2018). Milner (2007) sees empathy through the lens of racial discord. A Black professor who teaches mostly White female aspiring teachers, Milner brings to his classes his own narratives of the racism and microaggressions he regularly experiences. Sharing these experiences creates the level of discomfort needed that prompts his students to begin the process of deconstructing their privilege (Milner, 2007). However, this method only offers a narrow view of empathy. Although Warren (2018) was unable to locate the best practices for cultivating empathy in student educators, his analysis of the culturally responsive scholarship of researchers such as Delpit, Ladson-Billings, Gay, and others enabled him to construct a framework for cultivating empathy through a process of perspective-taking steeped in critical self-reflection (2018, Table 1).

Educating Teachers in CR-SE: Best Practices

Teacher education programs must prepare teachers for the diverse cultures of the students they will teach, including awareness and acceptance of these differences (Milner et al., 2003; Delpit, 1988/2012). Milner et al. (2003) offer a roadmap for cultivating cultural responsiveness in new teachers, stating that they must first be taught to self-reflect, which is critical to improving praxis. Second, the pedagogical approach must help teachers come to terms with their personal beliefs and to understand their racial and cultural capital. Finally, teachers must be taught to understand the power structures so that they can be role models rather than perpetrators of unconscious bias (Milner et al. 2003, p. 69).

Through his exhaustive literature review, Warren (2018) found evidence of culturally responsive classroom practices. Citing the work of Ladson-Billings, Warren asserts that “academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical awareness” can be achieved by “the application of empathy through perspectives taking” (2018, p. 3). This approach enables students to believe that their teacher cares for them and values them as a vital member of the classroom community. Referencing the works found in his extensive review (Howard, 2010; Paris & Alim, 2014/2017; and Gay, 2010), Warren further posits that students perceive “that their ethnic or racial identity, cultural pride, and heritage are sustained and regularly affirmed” when the “majority of classroom learning experienced are directly relevant to, and reflective of, students’ home lives and cultural experiences outside of school” (p. 3). In order to build a cultural connection with their students, he states, the teacher must activate empathy to acquire the requisite knowledge they will need to inform practice.

Teaching KEEPS

During my students’ final semester in the capstone course, they engage in critical self-reflection on their journey to becoming a teacher and articulate their pedagogical beliefs and values. They write about some of their students’ strengths and challenges and how they leverage their cultural capital to ensure success. They then connect these practices to the KEEPS claims, and critically assess how well they have mastered the framework and explain how they will improve their craft going forward.

The KEEPS values, which are unique to LIU’s Brooklyn campus, were designed to guide new urban educators to meet rising academic standards while engaging with the unique strengths and experiences of urban students they serve (LIU, 2020). Each of the KEEPS domains represent the qualities desired in urban educators:

- **KNOWLEDGE** and intellectual inquisitiveness about children, schools, and the world.
- **ENQUIRY**, or the collective discipline of observation, reflection, and non-judgmental description of children and their schoolwork, as well as descriptive inquiry of teaching and professional practice.
- **EMPATHY** that rests on human uniqueness and the capacity to develop, as well as responsiveness to the needs and interests of urban learners and communities.
- **PLURALISM** and attention to differences and to inclusion of all in the learning community of schools and the wider community.
- **SOCIAL COMMITMENT** and the building of a just and democratic society.

Student educators engage with each of these values during their time at LIU. They have been operationalized as follows.

Student Educators’ Narratives on Their Culturally Responsive Practices

I invited three of my former students who had expressed interest in publishing their work to co-author this piece with me. Their reflections on the KEEPS values one year after completing the capstone course highlighted the ways they have become culturally responsive educators.

Helena Fisher’s Narrative

Helena Fisher is a special education teacher of color in a Title I school. She grew up traveling around the world, as her father served in the air force. The support she received from her teachers at age 16 after the death of her mother shaped her conception of an ideal teacher and inspired her to teach. Her own experience enabled her to recognize the importance of empathy in building strong relationships with her students.

TABLE 1. KEEPS CLAIMS (REVISED MAY 2015)

KNOWLEDGE

- K 1: Students are intellectually rooted in the liberal arts and sciences and the foundations of education.
- K 2: Students are knowledgeable about self, theory, practice, and/or child development within sociocultural/linguistic contexts.
- K 3: Students use knowledge of self, theory, practice, and/or child development within sociocultural/linguistic contexts to create appropriate learning environments and to teach in urban settings.
- K 4: Students are knowledgeable of the strengths of urban families, schools, classrooms, and communities.
- K 5: Students use knowledge of the strengths of urban families, schools, classrooms, and communities to create appropriate learning environments and to teach in urban settings.
- K 6: Students demonstrate ability to construct relevant and meaningful curriculum using varied resources and based on Common Core State Standards.
- K 7: Students demonstrate the ability to teach the knowledge base relevant to their teaching discipline as described in the Common Core State Standards.
- K 8: Students understand multiple literacies to teach in urban settings.
- K 9: Students apply multiple literacies to teach in urban settings.
- K 10: Students integrate and use knowledge of self, family, school, community, and professional resources and literature to construct knowledge.
- K 11: Students demonstrate skill in written expression for academic and professional purposes.

ENQUIRY

- En 1: Students are active inquirers who observe, describe, and reflect on teaching and learning practices.
- En 2: Students know how to frame meaningful questions and locate relevant resources to support the study of teaching and learning.
- En 3: Students know what is needed to create a learning context that engages students in inquiry.
- En 4: Students create learning contexts that engage their students in inquiry.
- En 5: Students show commitment to the ongoing improvement of their teaching.

EMPATHY

- Em 1: Students know and appreciate that no two students are alike.
- Em 2: Students care for and believe in the potential of their students.
- Em 3: Students know to gain knowledge of their students' strengths, interests, and feelings.
- Em 4: Students use knowledge of their students' strengths, interests, and feelings to motivate and teach.
- Em 5: Students know what is needed to create a caring community of learners.
- Em 6: Students create caring communities of learners.

PLURALISM

- P 1: Students are aware of their own values and assumptions and question their biases as they relate to issues of diversity.
- P 2: Students demonstrate understanding/appreciation of the heritages, life experiences, and historical backgrounds of diverse social, cultural, and linguistic groups in our society and schools.
- P 3: Students implement a range of instructional approaches and strategies that are needed to educate diverse learners in a variety of contexts.

SOCIAL COMMITMENT

- S 1: Students understand their role and responsibility in advocating for equitable and appropriate educational services for children and their families.
- S 2: Students understand their role and responsibility in improving classrooms, schools, and/or communities.
- S 3: Students demonstrate academic integrity, professional responsibility, and ethical behavior in their scholarship and practice.

The numbered claims listed under each of the KEEPS domains are not an exhaustive list of what each domain stands for; rather, they are universal guides that can be easily implemented.

An ideal teacher is prepared not only to teach but to guide students through the learning process. They should be willing to go the extra mile in order to see their students succeed. As a teacher, I want the classroom to be a place where my students get the most out of their time with me. This includes having classroom management and having control over behaviors that may occur. My teacher performance observations reflect my tenacity in developing relationships with my students and creating a safe learning environment. This is extremely important to my practice, as without the foundation of good relationships, I would have a harder time delivering the knowledge my students need to progress. These relationships are, of course, shaped by my role as a teacher, but they also are informed by own perspective as a student, which has helped me develop an awareness of the struggles my students face when learning new content.

Helena's approach to showing that she cares deeply for them is consistent with that of Noddings (2012) and Ladson-Billings (2009), and despite a rocky first year, it enabled her to build strong relationships and address deficiencies in her job performance ratings. She reflects:

We teachers have responsibilities beyond merely teaching in front of a group of students, such as developing relationships, getting to know and advocating for our students, and creating a classroom environment where our students feel it is a place for them. I believe developing good relationships with my students sets the foundation for having success in all areas in the classroom: cooperation, focus, participation, and learning. All begin with knowing my students, which enables us to develop a relationship and partnership in the classroom. Our strong relationships with our students are rooted in the KEEPS claims knowledge and pluralism.

By getting to know her students and their needs, Helena can create a safe and welcoming environment that is conducive to learning. Her students respond to the positive classroom culture by adhering to behavior norms and engaging with the lessons. Helena's success in this area enabled her to turn around her initial low performance ratings to be ranked effective. She recalls:

Focusing on relationships with students has honed my classroom management skills and led to my "effective" rating in the areas of "Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport" and "Managing Student Behavior." When starting at the new school last September, I was determined to better myself and not let the previous school year determine my new year. This year I am the grade team leader, I am on the consultation committee, and I have been named "teacher of the month" twice.

When a new teacher feels empowered by the strong relationships built with students and is validated by positive reinforcement from administrators, the students' academic success is inevitable. I have low-level readers in my classes who have improved dramatically. One student has improved by two grade levels, and another has increased by one grade level. I am continuing to grow in my practice and working hard to develop as a teacher. I continue to grow in my practice and will work hard to develop as a teacher. I am committed to the growth of my students and myself. I aspire to make a difference in my students' lives by motivating them and providing help to build their self-confidence, and to have a positive effect in other areas of their lives.

Students respond when they know their teachers are invested in their success. The KEEPS framework can guide novice teachers in building strong relationships with their students. These relationships can dramatically reduce the equity gap.

Joe Melendez' Narrative

Joe Melendez is a Latino male who is a special education English language arts teacher in a high-needs middle school in Corona, Queens. He is more introspective about the impact education has had on his life and strives to understand how his experiences will impact the lives of his students. Joe fosters strong relationships with his predominantly low-income Latinx students and understands the challenges they face growing up in an economically depressed community, especially attending an underfunded school. He understands that building strong relationships with his students is critical, especially in light of the abrupt transition to remote learning brought on by COVID-19. Joe reflects:

Just as our students' past experiences play a large role in how they learn and approach education, so do our past experiences affect who we are as educators. As such, I chose to become a Teaching Fellow because I wanted to be as meaningful to my students as my teachers were to me. I may have forgotten the names of most of the people I went to high school with, but I sincerely doubt I'll ever forget Mr. Ferrigno or Mrs. Scully, both English teachers who went out of their way to teach more than basic literacy skills. I hope to be that kind of teacher students will remember positively whenever they think back to their time in school.

Joe's experience with memorable teachers made him want to become that type of teacher for his own students. He recounts that these teachers did not merely teach the content, but that they went out of their way for him. Joe reflects on how he could do this in his own practice:

I was taught to use the knowledge I gained from my professors to better understand the challenges present in my classes, as well as the best practices to help my students. I was taught to use empathy to connect with my students and their community, as well as to engage in enquiry. By asking questions, I help my students attain the content knowledge, and their answers help me assess their needs. LIU's emphasis on these values helps me recognize the pluralism of my school community and appreciate the level of social commitment required to advocate for my students. LIU's KEEPS claims have shaped my practice and my identity as an educator.

The work of Paolo Freire resonates with Joe because he believes that learning is most effective when students' lived experiences combine with their curiosity and interest in a subject to gain new knowledge. He reflects:

It is imperative that curriculum content and assignments be diverse enough to keep students interested, otherwise education can become more of an uphill battle than it needs to be. The overuse of terms like "rigor" does not reflect what it means to inspire students to fully engage in critical thinking and, ultimately, to really learn. In short, the difference is between students memorizing the answers to a test and forgetting them the second they get their scores back, and students retaining knowledge born out of legitimate engagement with a subject.

Joe realizes that taking content knowledge and pedagogy and turning it into his own praxis dictates that knowledge be diverse both in the source it stems from and in complexity. In other words, knowledge should not be spoon fed to students for rote memorization, but instead should be distilled from a variety of sources and viewpoints so that students can develop more complex thinking patterns to craft a truth that is most relevant to their culture and belief systems. Knowledge that does not come from diverse sources can quickly start to feel repetitive, irrelevant, and stagnant. Similarly, if an instructor fails to challenge students, or worse, manages to frustrate them, they will not engage with the subject. In short, an inadequate praxis becomes a barrier, rather than a vehicle, to new knowledge.

This mirrors Emdin's (2011) "Five Cs" of education: cogenerative dialogue, co-teaching, cosmopolitanism, context, and content. In his popular Ted Talk, Emdin explained that content is last of the five because without first applying the other four to build strong relationships, students will not learn.² Joe draws from the work of Sapon-Shevin (2004) to dismantle the systemic oppression inherent in the curriculum and avoids "othering" marginalized groups in his classroom. He reflects:

My praxis determines how much content a student retains and which students can readily access knowledge, which in turn affects how the students view and treat themselves as well as each other. In essence, my pedagogical choices determine whether marginalized groups in my classroom continue to be "othered" and whether they have equitable access to the subject.

It is clear that best practices and inclusive praxis come from socially conscious pedagogy and from educators taking the time to truly do the work. Joe believes the KEEPS values helped develop his confidence so that he could design engaging lessons that honor his students' diversity.

Teeyana Thomas' Narrative

Teeyana Thomas grew up in a Caribbean household in a highly impoverished neighborhood. She sees teaching as a form of activism that enables her to tap into students' cultural capital and instill in them the joy and value of education. Aspiring to be an educator who provides equitable education to all students despite broad structural inequalities, Teeyana uses her own experiences to help students realize that they do not need to subscribe to the ideas of the dominant culture or to see life's difficulties as a setback. She helps students use their difficulties as motivation to accomplish their personal and academic goals. Teeyana believes the KEEPS claims exemplify the CR-SE standards and values that urban educators need to improve their students' academic achievement of students and to make a difference in their personal lives. She reflects:

Knowledge is gained from courses in pre-service training, skill-building sessions, courses taken in our graduate program, and our experience in the classrooms. It is important for educators to understand what knowledge matters, whose knowledge matters, and how to ensure access for all students.

Teeyana's stance is deeply rooted in Delpit's work, in which the primary role of the teacher is to provide students' access to the culture of power. Acknowledging that knowledge is multifaceted, Teeyana is committed to seek the answers to questions she may not understand, and in doing so embodies CR-SE principles by becoming an agent for change so that dominant structural barriers can be dismantled. Enquiry is essential to create change effectively within the education system, as it is the driving force behind refining pedagogical practices. It is through enquiry that educators are able to become agents of change, reflect on areas needed for improvement and growth, and to create platforms for advocacy.

Woven together, the KEEPS values provide the framework a new teacher can adopt to establish CR-SE practices in the classroom. These practices can extend beyond the classroom walls to effect changes in school policies and procedures, and in the broader community. Teeyana believes activism and empathy go hand in hand and are vital to building rapport with students to understand their concerns, cares, and interests. She also believes that urban educators must demonstrate pluralism as they teach multicultural students and tailor the course content to reflect their diverse cultures, thereby affirming their identities.

Empathy alone cannot solve all challenges. Teeyana combined knowledge, enquiry, pluralism, and social commitment to design a curriculum unit that included an action resource process. Drawing from Emdin's reality pedagogy, she understood that a key to student engagement across content was to give the students a voice through discussion-based teaching. As a result, her students took ownership of their education while she learned what was relevant to them. As Teeyana's students developed a voice in the classroom, it became clearer to her how to tailor the content to their interests and thereby increase their engagement. Teeyana sees her role as an educator who will inspire, empower, motivate, and support her students and their voices. She explains:

My goal as an educator is to understand, assess, and reflect on the curriculum I use with my multicultural students. I plan on creating an anti-racist curriculum that helps students to critically examine power relations in society and empowers them to challenge and change dominant beliefs in society.

Teeyana believes that KEEPS prepared her to adapt to changing variables in the school system and in her students' lives. She employed a journaling technique that, consistent with Milner's work (2007), helps teachers develop their students' empathy by creating a safe space to address their socioemotional needs. She explains:

As a special educator, I have had to adjust techniques used to build relationships with students. Within the first week of remote learning instruction, I realized that new strategies would be needed to keep students engaged throughout the transition to remote learning, as students reported that they were feeling overwhelmed. I assign frequent journal prompts to help students engage in socioemotional learning. The journal tasks enlighten me as to how students are experiencing the pandemic by providing valuable insight into their physical and emotional well-being. The journals allow students to have a continuous space in which they can express and manage their emotions during these unprecedented times.

The KEEPS philosophy is evident in Teeyana's practice through her content knowledge, co-inquiry with students, and overall empathy. These factors promote the strong bonds she has with her students, which in turn sustains the relationships that enabled her to guide students through the challenges of remote learning, build a community of learners through pluralism, and model social commitment and civic engagement.

Conclusion

The failure to properly educate our Black and Brown children is a national crisis. Closing the equity gap has been further complicated by the challenges brought on by COVID-19. Providing culturally relevant, sustaining education is a proven way to support our most vulnerable learners and help close the gap. LIU provides student educators with the means to operationalize best CR-SE practices. Helena's reflection on her trauma and loss during her teenage years enabled her to recall the empathetic practices of the teachers who comforted and supported her. Empathy, along with knowledge and pluralism, helped her to get to know her students and to build an effective and inclusive classroom culture. Despite earning a low performance rating in her first year of teaching, Helena leveraged her strong relationships with students to become successful in the classroom.

Joe reflected on how the school system affected his life so that he could help his students navigate their own challenges. He emulates the teachers who made a positive difference in his life and hopes his students will remember him. He has come to realize that empathy builds relationships that are the key to engagement, deep learning, critical thinking, and retention of content knowledge. Joe insists that having diverse, culturally responsive classroom materials help teachers avoid "othering" students in a way that distances them from content knowledge.

Teeyana uses her experiences growing up in an immigrant family that was struggling financially to model goal-oriented motivation for her students. She embraces enquiry as a powerful tool for dismantling oppressive structures and creating platforms for students' voices and advocacy. She believes that showing empathy and having a strong social commitment can help individual learners become strong members of a community and agents of change.

These KEEPS claims are universally applicable and they operationalize values that advance culturally responsive teaching. Engaging with the claims promotes the critical self-reflection needed to recognize bias, understand and embrace students' cultures and identities, and provide a welcoming classroom that caters to each student's unique learning needs. Practicing KEEPS in the classroom will enable teachers to build strong relationships with students and lead to their academic success.

Endnotes

¹ See www.schottfoundation.org/publications/Public_Education_and_Black_Male_Students.pdf.

² See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Y9tVf_8fqo.

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Julie M. Milner is an EdD candidate and education professor in the Teaching and Learning Department at Long Island University's Brooklyn Campus. She is a civil and constitutional rights attorney and a former teacher with the New York City Department of Education. Her research interests include culturally relevant teacher education, building strong student-teacher relationships, and restorative and contemplative practices to improve retention and engagement for behaviorally challenged urban students. She can be reached at Julie.Milner@liu.edu.