Silence Is Not Always Golden in Dialogic Classrooms: Implications for High-Stakes Testing Culture, Teacher Evaluation, and Teacher Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

A targeted literature review provides the theoretical framework for a non-participant observer study of the dynamics of student intra-group oral collaborations during an 11th grade Literature Circle project. My inquiry addresses a concern raised by progressive educators in the US that East Asian students are silent because of their race or ethnicity. I argue that that is not the case. Silence represents cultural difference; an antiracist stance rejects seeing oral collaboration as a hierarchical cultural standard, since both silence and speech can be either progressive or maladaptive. A qualitative analysis of two representative student groups shows that students can exhibit traits of either a ‘dynamic-learning frame’ or ‘fixed-performance frame’ regardless of ethnic origin. Although East Asian students may be reluctant to voice their ideas in dialogic settings due to cultural reasons, soliciting oral participation, an ideal of American progressive pedagogy, need not be branded an act of cultural racism. On the contrary, the aims of the dialogic classroom are consistent with those of social and emotional learning (SEL), culturally and historically responsive literacy (HRL), and Soka education’s concept of global citizenship. Acknowledgement of the personal and cognitive advantages of the ‘dynamic-learning frame,’ which can be fostered by a dialogic or progressive, and constructivist pedagogy leads to a critique of: 1) the policy shortcomings of high-stakes testing culture because it tends to forestall the development of a ‘dynamic-learning frame,’ empathy, socio-political awareness, and deep understanding of content among students due to the high levels of stress that it engenders in NextGeners; and 2) the limitations of a teacher evaluation system that has been so pared down that it no longer supplies vitally needed feedback to teachers on their SEL practices, thus making ‘equity for all’ a more elusive reality.

Introduction

An enduring aspect of progressive pedagogy asks teachers to build student capacity for oral collaboration by employing a variety of strategies in their lessons, units, and modules (modules are clusters of units), such as Literature Circles, Accountable Talk, Think-Pair-Share, Socratic Seminar, Fish Bowl, and others. Because I wished to prioritize student choice as regards both text selection and flexible groupings, beyond helping my 11th grade students build capacity for oral collaboration, I decided that Literature Circles best met my needs for the American Literature project I had planned. Teachers have a variety of approaches to Literature Circles, and no one approach satisfies everyone. For my purposes, I found that the College Board protocols for Literature Circles—with five clearly defined participation roles—were particularly well-suited for the integration of individual close reading, intra-group dialogue, and reflection. And since I wished to document those student intra-group dynamics, I wrote—and was awarded—an alumni association faculty grant to purchase video equipment. My goal was to preserve a record of student interactions, analyze them, and share the results with my colleagues. As I stated in my grant application:
Video documentation of student group interactions and their evolving team dynamics can provide teachers with a window into how students attempt to solve problems related to conceptualizing and orally expressing ideas about text and the world, so that teachers may further facilitate learning and engagement; foster the emergence of collaborative leadership among students; and help develop poise, articulateness, civility, and other soft skills sought after by industry and institutions of higher learning.

The grant moreover ensured that the English Language Arts Skills Scope and Sequence for Literary Analysis and Speaking and Listening would be brought prominently into focus.

Subsequently, and in light of several collegial conversations that took place during English Department meetings (especially May 2018), the Learning Partners Program that was devoted primarily to issues of social-emotional learning and racial justice (AY 2018-2019), and additional readings in the literature, my initial aim narrowed to a consideration of race and ethnicity in relation to oral language collaboration in the context of progressive pedagogy. Allow me to contextualize the evolution of my thinking.

**Contextualizing the Inquiry**

For the May 2018 English Department meeting, our assistant principal suggested that we read an article by Carol A. Tateishi, Director of the Bay Area Writing Project at UC Berkeley, curiously titled “Why are the Asian-American kids silent in class?” The article targeted the “lack of participation by students of Asian descent in the oral language activities of the class.” Several questions presented themselves: Are Asian American students less likely than non-Asian American students to speak up in class due to cultural factors? And if so, would insisting that they speak up be culturally insensitive? According to U.S. News & World Report, the student demographics at our high school (a nationally top-ranked STEM high school) is 61% Asian (2018), a fact that made Tateishi’s article particularly relevant. Indeed, colleagues here and elsewhere widely recognize the presence of “the silent Asian-American student” in our classrooms. Tateishi’s main argument is that certain East Asian (Japanese, in her case, but also Korean and Chinese) socio-cultural values clash with the value that progressive American educators assign to oral classroom collaboration, as opposed to “traditional” educators who favor direct-instruction and a more lecture-based teaching style, and who may eschew student-centered approaches. For example, East Asians share an abiding belief that “silence is a sign of self-reliance and strength.” Furthermore, there is a “negative attitude in Japanese culture toward verbosity in men.” East Asians commonly believe that “too much talk could cause disrespect and harsh feelings.” Thus, in general, East Asians believe that talk about feelings or personal experiences should not occur in public, and women and girls are taught to keep a low public profile and to be meek. In addition, a speech impediment or, among English Language Learners (ELL’s) and former-ELL’s, “worry about their language skills” may also discourage oral collaboration. At any rate, Tateishi’s article describes a clash between the socio-cultural values of the home education of East Asian students and the progressive values of many American teachers regarding oral collaboration. Progressive American educators believe that “oral language can be used to negotiate meaning; risk-taking in talk is valued; speaking in class increases engagement; and
classroom dialogue deepens learning” (Tateishi). Thus, because East Asian cultural values celebrate silence and avoid verbosity, they seem to be at odds with a vital element of American progressive pedagogy, namely promoting oral collaboration as a means to developing critical leadership skills, self-advocacy, and democratic living.

Acculturating Asian students to progressive American norms may be facilitated, Tateishi goes on to say, by ‘small group instruction’ and the presence of ‘group leaders’ who can “author” Asian American students to speak up, “given the hierarchical nature of many Asian-American families.” Ostensibly, Tateishi claims that the purpose of this acculturation is to empower Asian Americans to become adept at using oral language to effectively advocate for themselves and improve social justice outcomes for society at large. However, during the discussion that ensued at our May 2018 department meeting, a Korean American colleague questioned whether Tateishi might be supporting willy-nilly a chauvinistic racial bias by promoting the ideal of oral class participation championed by progressive educators, since those educators tend to be members of the dominant racial and socio-linguistic class. In 2017, the National Teacher and Principal Survey found that 80 percent of the 3.8 million teachers in the United States were white (Loewus). Consequently, a new question seemed to impose itself: When English teachers encourage oral collaboration among Asian American students, as opposed to a respectful silence that is culturally appropriate, do we promote an underlying bias in favor of white Western values? Of philosophical, socio-cultural, and political importance, the question of chauvinistic racial bias in favor of white Western values, however, was too broad for my pragmatic goal of studying “student intra-group interactions and their evolving team dynamics.” Also, I needed a way to distinguish cultural differences from the racial and ethnic implications that educators read into Tateishi’s work. So, I reframed my research question: Are East Asian American students silent because they are of East Asian heritage? I argue that that is not the case. Hence, I began to look for a lens through which to view student oral intra-group dialogue that avoided post-colonial problematics, while allowing me to consider cultural differences with respect to oral classroom participation in light of the social justice and social-emotional implications it harbors. I found that lens in the work of cognitive psychologists, socio-linguists, and reading specialists, and particularly in the work of New Zealand native and professor of education Peter H. Johnston.

Of Mindsets and Frames

Basing himself in part on the research of cognitive psychologist Carol Dweck and her groundbreaking work Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, Johnston, in his work titled Opening Minds: Using Language to Change Lives, distinguishes between two ‘frames’: a ‘Dynamic-Learning Frame’ and a ‘Fixed-Performance Frame.’ On the one hand, Johnston situates adherence to the ‘dynamic-learning frame’ in students who “believe knowledge is growing, changing, and likely to be affected by context and perspective;” in students who “even after having made up their mind about an issue, […] are prepared to consider new information or different perspectives and change;” and finally, in students who are able to “view open questions that are amenable to a range of answers and perspectives as most interesting” (58). On the other hand, Johnston situates adherence to the ‘fixed-performance
frame’ in students who “believe knowledge is a collection of facts that are not affected by context, and have a strong desire for stability and certainty—knowledge that everyone agrees with,” in students who “judge ideas quickly based on the most accessible quality and cling to that judgment regardless of new information and particularly in the face of minority perspectives;” and in students who “avoid uncertainty and unpredictable situations, including open questions that can be answered in different ways” (58). Both Dweck and Johnston believe that ‘mindsets’ or ‘frames’ are learned, rather than racially determined, and that social-emotional learning (SEL) in dialogic classrooms can influence which ‘mindset’ or ‘frame’ students choose to adopt.

Dialogic vs Direct Instruction

Accordingly, Johnston acknowledges two types of classrooms: dialogic classrooms and direct-instruction classrooms. ‘Dialogic classrooms’ are classrooms “in which facts are considered in different contexts and in which people challenge each other’s views and conclusions” (2012: 52). For the purposes of this inquiry, the terms ‘progressive’ and ‘dialogic’ are used interchangeably. And the benefits aptly extend to ELL’s and former-ELL’s. Books, therefore, “are not merely to entertain or to teach kids.” Rather, writes Johnston, “they are tools for growing minds” (2012: 56). On the contrary, ‘direct-instruction classrooms’ provide cover for students who have adopted a ‘fixed-performance frame’ and favor “simple facts, consensus, and uniformity of ideas” as opposed to complexity, multiple perspectives, and uncertainty, and who exhibit what researchers call a “high need for closure” and a tendency to “seize and freeze” (2012: 62). For example, if a student enters a conversation with an opinion, s/he ‘freezes to it’ and “refuses to consider other views;” or if a student enters a conversation without an opinion, s/he is easily persuaded to adopt a partner’s opinion, “seizing it and freezing to it” (2012: 62). Although Johnston admits that the behavior of students with high ‘need for closure’ in discussion groups is problematic, he insists that “as with the fixed and dynamic frames, need for closure is also socialized and situational” and that “dialogic instruction is an excellent antidote” (2012: 63). Although occasionally useful, ‘direct-instruction’ does not produce the sort of complex, polyvalent, and critical expressions that progressive educators seek to elicit from students.

Johnston concedes that educators must attend to “cultural differences in social logic” (2012: 84), but he argues that research shows that East Asian students have the capacity to adapt to and benefit from a dialogic classroom experience. Students “whose cultural experience in school was thoroughly monologic,” he writes, where the teacher asked the questions and the students stood to respond individually or the class responded in unison, typical of East Asian schooling, for example in Ma Anshan, China, are in fact able to very quickly adapt and become “engaged in dialogic interaction” after a cursory introduction which prompted students “to listen to each other, take each other seriously, and hear all voices” (2012: 99). In fact, the conversation then becomes all about “ideas, logic, evidence, and possibilities,” rather than about personal agreements or disagreements (2012: 104). The oral interactions and intra-group dynamics of the East Asian students in my 11th grade classes in AY 2018-2019 will be considered within Johnston’s framework.

Silent Voices
Listening and speaking are two of the most obvious phases of dialogue and require socio-linguistic competence—including turn-taking and active listening—as well as a desire for meaning-making. And yet, it may be possible for students who remain silent to be using the conversations of others to help them process their own ideas without always voicing their thinking. As education researcher Jane S. Townsend noted in her 1998 article “Silent Voices: What Happens to Quiet Students During Classroom Discussion?” students who remain quiet in class may still be engaged and “doing important mental work” (Townsend). For example, many East Asian students have admitted to my colleague Adam Virzi in conversations outside of class that “they are not talking because they are critically listening, synthesizing, and formulating their own opinions.” Townsend clarifies that students who remain quiet can nevertheless be operating within a ‘dynamic-learning frame’ and avoiding ‘need for closure.’ While there are some East Asian students who engage in critical listening but don’t talk within their peer group, there are others for whom remaining silent is a sign of ‘need for closure.’ It is important to distinguish when silence, as a recognized cultural difference among East Asians and people of East Asian heritage, is a sign of critical listening and when it is maladaptive; however, at no time should it be construed as being racially or ethnically determined. As cultural historian Ibram X. Kendi writes, cultural differences exist, but we should not turn them into hierarchical cultural standards that are inherently racist (Kendi 151). To avoid accusations of cultural imperialism while insisting on the benefits of oral collaboration, progressive educators must remain sensitive to the cultural differences of our students, but refrain from reifying those differences into a hierarchy of cultural standards that create cultural racism. In this way, we successfully model being antiracist. “To be antiracist,” Kendi writes, “is to reject cultural standards and level cultural difference” (151). Whether progressive or maladaptive, reticence to “speak up” in school among East Asians represents a cultural difference; to maintain that it is racially or ethnically determined, however, is to pit it against the progressive ideals of oral classroom collaboration and usher in a racist hierarchy, and thus undermine those ideals. I will elaborate further on these points in my qualitative analysis of the transcripts of the two student intra-group oral collaborations that form the object of my inquiry.

Townsend identifies a number of other reasons why students may choose not to participate in collaborative conversations, and they include: being uncertain about where one can “appropriately interject a remark,” feeling uncomfortable in the class, being confused about the “course material,” lacking sufficient time, and most notably feeling “irritation and impatience with the inconclusive nature of personal interpretation” (Townsend). ‘Irritation and impatience with the inconclusive nature of personal interpretation’ is qualitatively different and evinces a ‘fixed-performance frame.’ Ideally, irritation and impatience should have no place in dialogic classrooms. Townsend recognizes the value of “speaking out” in class, not only because it is difficult to register students’ intentions when oral production flags, but also because of the risk that silent students in a dialogic environment may slip into a ‘fixed-performance frame’ and miss out on the opportunities for leadership, self-advocacy, and perspective-taking, all highly prized progressive skills. “Perhaps,” as Townsend writes, “all real discussion—because it must invite differing perspectives—requires an openness to possibilities that rejects definitive resolution.” Enabling students to feel comfortable in dialogic
classrooms where hotly debated ideas can often lose their pat demarcations should be the goal of integrating SEL with academic content.

To that end, Townsend suggests several practical ways to facilitate dialogue, such as: asking students to generate a set of questions in writing prior to class, allowing for wait time, encouraging students to “write down their reactions to the reading” before engaging in discussion, reflecting in writing on the “influence of the class talk on their thinking” after the discussion, breaking students up into small flexible groups, “using open-ended questions that invite multiple perspectives about a reading,” and allowing students “to write individual responses to each other’s questions.” In sum, the fact that East Asian students remain quiet during classroom conversations does not preclude the possibility that they may be actively engaged in learning, as Townsend suggests, or even contributing to the conversations by virtue of their presence as observers, but certainly their reticence does not lessen the value of collaborative conversations for progressive educators who credit the ‘dynamic-learning frame’ with fostering democratic living, empathetic imagination, and critical thinking.

However, despite my having employed in my classroom over a two-week arc several of the strategies suggested by Tateishi, Townsend, and others to elicit the participation of East Asian students, I found their willingness to speak up only minimally affected, and then only temporarily. According to Johnston, more permanent change will depend on the feedback we give students, the way teachers frame activities, and what children are taught “about how people’s brains and minds work” (2012: 18). Reluctance on the part of most students in Dialogic Group 008 (whose transcript appears below) to change from a ‘fixed-performance frame’ to a ‘dynamic-learning frame’ became noticeable once I began writing feedback on their daily group reflections about the challenges they encountered in speaking, listening, and understanding the text, as well as the goals they had for their collaborative conversations. My feedback was designed to present reticent students with several self-empowering strategies. For example, each student should ‘warm up’ by sharing his or her insights about the text for 30 seconds in round-robin fashion before the collaborative conversation from the perspective of students’ specific roles began; one-mic rule so that students do not talk over each other and everyone gets a chance; students should track whoever is speaking, which helps them listen to what is being said with greater understanding; students must cite textual evidence to support their ideas, thus slowing the pace of the conversation and encouraging students to get more deeply involved; students should practice good manners and be polite and courteous to each other; no one should dominate the conversation; and as a team, students should correct misreadings and misconceptions. The East Asian students in Dialogic Group 008 who were “authored” to speak, but later reverted to silence or made minimal comments, belied a ‘seize and freeze’ pattern, forestalling their ability to advocate for themselves, practice ‘criticality’ (a term used by Gholdy Muhammad, author of an equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy, to refer to socio-political consciousness), sustain a leadership role, or engage in forms of democratic turn-taking. Those students—allochthonous East Asian male adolescents who attend school at a top-ranked STEM high school in the U.S. as compared to the autochthonous East Asian elementary school students cited by Johnston—may have needed additional time and required repeated engagement in a dialogic classroom before they could emerge from their ‘fixed-performance frame’ and shift to a
‘dynamic-learning frame.’ In contrast, in Dialogic Group 012 (whose transcript also appears below), the East Asian students who spoke when “authored” to speak, but later reverted to silence or made minimal comments, still operated within a ‘dynamic-learning frame’ and did “important mental work,” once again showing that factors other than race or ethnicity are in play. Students should never be made to feel that cultural differences, among peers or with respect to their teacher, identify them as inferior or subject to a hierarchical ‘cultural standard,’ for doing so would foment cultural racism and co-opt the aims of progressive education.

Qualitative Analysis of Dialogic Group Transcripts

My intention to facilitate the emergence of a ‘dialogic classroom’ for my 11th grade students required that they first rank order a menu of sixteen works of American fiction (1838-1970) to read in their Literature Circles. In almost all cases, students received their first or second choice. Each 11th grade class ended up having seven self-selected groups of four or five students, and their roles—Diction Detective, Discussion Leader, Artist, Bridge Builder, and Reporter—were also self-selected. Next, students received their text and established a reading schedule that covered ten class periods. Thus, for the next two weeks, students were asked to log at least two entries of quotes and notes per night into their triple-entry reading journal, so as to be prepared at the start of the next class to exchange journal entries with the other members of their group and comment in writing on each other’s responses. Students then had 15 minutes of class time to complete an activity sheet adapted to their specific role; and once the activity sheet was completed, all students engaged in intra-group collaborative conversations led by the Discussion Leader for 12 minutes. During the conversations, students alternated taking notes on the points raised by all the members of the group, the supporting textual evidence, and any pertinent comments that the discussion elicited. Finally, students had 6 minutes at the end of class to reflect in writing on how well they were able to speak, listen, and understand the text by noting challenges and goals for the next session. (Time allotments may vary depending on the length of the class period). As the teacher, I provided daily feedback on those group reflection sheets, and created the conditions for a ‘dialogic classroom,’ which I hoped would enable all students to break out of their ‘fixed-performance frame,’ for as Johnston writes, “We can change children’s comfort with uncertainty by changing the conversational structures that fill their lives, or by changing the situation” (2012: 63). But students enter that space with different propensities, inclinations, and beliefs. The fact that students worked in groups of 4-5, and that the intra-group discussions were facilitated by a discussion leader, should have, according to Tateishi, made it easier, specifically for East Asian students, to participate freely. As it turns out, that was not always true. In fact, in the first of the two groups, namely Dialogic Group 008, the oral production of the two East Asian male students was highly problematic, which, in turn, impacted the dynamics of the entire group. And yet, neither race nor ethnicity determined who among the members of the group would remain silent or adopt a ‘fixed-performance frame.’ Omar, who is of Egyptian descent, for example, exhibited ‘seize and freeze’ behaviors and ‘need for closure’ too.

The transcripts below reflect the intra-group collaborations of two representative student groups from two different classes of 11th grade students who read and discussed two different texts:
Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, respectively. I videotaped each group as students engaged in the dialogic segment of the lesson. Overall, students were attentive to their own intra-group discussion and distractions were rare. I admit the possibility, however, that videotaping may have led some students to feel like they were being “put on the spot,” which may have, to some degree, caused their anxiety level to rise and impacted their willingness to speak up, although when students were given the chance to opt out no one did. In addition, the noise level in the classroom was quite high. Noise level also constitutes a stressor, and along with time pressure, as Johnston has noted, “reliably increase[s] need for closure” (2012: 63). Although some students may be more self-conscious than others or more susceptible than others to noise stressors, those were obviously not the only factors in play that may have promoted a ‘fixed-performance frame’ or limited students from freely exercising criticality. Certainly, for East Asian students, as Tateishi has shown, but for others as well, home education, schooling style, the presence of violence in their social environments, poverty—60% of our school’s students qualify for free or reduced lunch—also contribute to ‘need for closure.’ From a policy perspective, mitigations of those factors should be pursued alongside promoting progressive and antiracist initiatives with the goal of improving student social-emotional and academic outcomes. Dialogic classrooms, as Johnston has made clear, have the greatest likelihood of restoring purpose to student leaning, which in turn will increase the likelihood that students adopt a ‘dynamic-learning frame’ and decrease their likelihood of adopting a ‘fixed-performance frame’ or exhibiting ‘need for closure.’ Socializing and situational factors, not race or ethnicity, influence adherence to one ‘frame’ or the other. In fact, a study of high school students in South Korea has shown that even mobile phone dependency negatively impacts social relationships and academic achievement, and positively predicts depression. Because factors beyond race and ethnicity contribute to ‘need for closure’ among East Asians, they cannot comprise a racial block closed to, and pitted against, progressive ideals. Not surprisingly, Johnston notes, moreover, that ‘need for closure’ can be linked to a predilection for “authoritarian governance structures and fundamentalist belief systems,” factors at odds with democratic principles and progressive ideals, although neither is exclusive to East Asian or Asian American students (63). Finally, contributing to ‘need for closure’ are also deafness and autism (see Johnston, 2012: 63, 75-76). In fact, one male student in Dialogic Group 008 is legally deaf. My inquiry does not pretend to offer an etiology of ‘need for closure,’ but rather to identify it in the oral interactions of the intra-group discussions whose transcripts I provide below, analyze how it impacts the dynamics of the student interactions and the students’ understanding of their chosen text.

**Literature Circle Dialogic Group 008—*Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller (2:48 minutes)**

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1 Seo, Dong Gi, et al. “Mobile phone dependency and its impacts on adolescents' social and academic behaviors.” *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 63, Oct. 2016, pp. 282-92, doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.026. Accessed 28 Mar 2020. "Results showed that mobile phone dependency negatively predicted attention and positively predicted depression, which in turn, affect social relationships with friends and both Korean language arts and mathematics achievement. Also, the mediating roles of attention, depression, and relationships with friends were found between mobile phone dependency and the academic achievement of middle and high school students in S. Korea."
Peter: Why does Willy have a flashback about Biff’s football game at Ebbets Field? (Silence). So, after Howard fires him, he gets a flashback about one night game, and then right after…uh, that was the time when during Biff’s last football game, and he remembers it because he just got fired and he’s just thinking about the good stuff that Biff did ’cause he’s in a bad mood right now ’cause he just got fired and that was like the last time Biff and him had a good relationship with Biff and Biff had a good future, and after that it was just messed up. (To Omar). Why did he have a flashback?

Omar: Uh… ‘cause he’s in a real bad mood right now and he’s thinking about the time when he had a good relationship.

Peter: (To Jingfan). Why did he have a flashback?

Jingfan: ‘Cause he’s trying to get his spirit back and…. (shakes head and becomes silent).

Peter: Jason, why did he have a flashback?

Jason: Yeah, on page 88.

Peter: Okay. Next question: Why didn’t Willy go to Alaska with Ben? (Silence). Well, I don’t think he went to Alaska with Ben because he was already so odd, and he wanted to be this great salesman; he thought he would make this great future for himself, and so he didn’t really know what going with Ben would do to him, whether it would make him rich, or what it would do to him, like he already had a steady job, you know, and I don’t really think he wanted to do that. (To Omar). What do you think?

Omar: I agree with you.

Peter: (To Jingfan). Why do you think Willy didn’t go with Ben?

Jingfan: I think he’s scared. (Silence). I’m not sure.

Peter: Jason, why do you think Willy didn’t go with Ben?

Jason: I agree with you because I also think he wanted to keep his stable job.

Peter’s role as Discussion Leader, who asks questions and can “author” other students in the group, ought to have facilitated the oral participation of the two male East Asian students according to Tateishi. Whether or not that is theoretically true, in practice the presence of a discussion leader facilitated their participation only to a very limited degree, judging from the transcript of the group’s
conversation. In fact, ‘need for closure’ seems to dominate the intra-group dynamics despite Peter’s best efforts to ask open-ended questions. On multiple occasions, Peter struggles to fill the silence by providing the group with an account of his own thoughts before turning to his default interlocutor, Omar, who either rephrases Peter’s idea or outright “agrees” with him without adding anything of his own. Omar, in fact, ‘seizes and freezes’ on Peter’s interpretation, typical of students who exhibit ‘need for closure’ and a ‘fixed-performance frame’ (Johnston, 2012). Do Jason and Jingfan defer to Peter because he is white, or because they are East Asian? Does race explain Omar’s behavior? In the final analysis, ‘need for closure’ is socialized, not a racial trait. As we shall see, stress is a factor that contributes to ‘need for closure,’ not only due to the expectations within our dialogic classroom, but from beyond our four walls, relative to due dates, projects, and tests in other subject areas.

Be that as it may, Jason and Jingfan slightly differ in their attitudes. When Peter directly asks Jason for his opinion, he merely echoes Peter’s question before admitting that he is stumped, i.e. disinterested; as if reading, thinking about, and discussing a text were a zero-sum game and the one right answer had eluded him; or as if, he too, were irritated by and impatient with the “inconclusive nature of personal interpretation.” To avoid being wrong and appearing unintelligent, Jason claims ignorance before ultimately choosing silence (see Dweck). His behavior is typical of a fixed mindset. Moreover, in a second instance, when Peter asks Jason to share his thinking, Jason ‘seizes and freezes’ to Peter’s opinion, thus exhibiting ‘need for closure’ and demonstrating his adherence to a ‘fixed-performance frame.’ Both Omar and Jason readily ‘seize and freeze.’ Neither entertains the possibility that industrialization or capitalism plays a role in Willy’s demise. However, Jingfan’s responses to Peter’s “authoring” begin boldly, promising analytical depth, sophistication, and insight—he’s trying to get his spirit back—and “I think he’s scared”—before lapsing into silence and succumbing to ‘need for closure.’ At first, Jingfan seems to offer a challenge to Peter’s ideas, but in the end, rather than engage fully in dialogic interaction by thinking of other possibilities and/or providing evidence and logical reasoning to support his views, he is content to allow his own ideas to languish, taking refuge in self-doubt and silence. It would be difficult to say that Jingfan’s disability has no effect on his willingness to elaborate on his ideas; it is certainly a contributing factor. Not only did ‘need for closure’ impact the intra-group dynamics, bringing them to a quasi-standstill, but it also affected the syntactic patterns of the discussion leader, which present as disordered, repetitive, and parenthetical, characterized by a tendency to move on despite a lack of engagement with his teammates or with the text. Ironically, this group consistently wrote on their daily reflections that they understood everything, had no challenges, and had reached all their goals. Denial, as Carol Dweck reminds us, is an indicator of a fixed mindset; each of these students could have been more himself had he opened up.

To be effective, teachers who promote the idea that “intelligence can be changed through sustained hard work,” need feedback that supports their will to impart to students that success is more a result “of effort, not ability,” of actual learning, not performance per se (Willingham 163). Unfortunately, teachers do not always get the support they need. Instead, teacher “performance” ratings, intended for accountability purposes, often substitute for conscientious feedback about what truly matters, i.e. safeguarding against shallow understanding or the tendency to “agree for the sake
of agreeing.” By neglecting critical supports for professional learning, administrators may in fact be perpetuating myths about how students learn, such as the superannuated belief in “learning styles,” or undermining the integrity of dialogic classrooms (Will, 2019). Teacher “performance” ratings can be reductive and reinforce ‘need for closure’ for teachers and students alike. Ratings may indeed be counterproductive because they fail to: a) provide nuanced, cognitively complex feedback about how to teach students to think; or b) support empathy, critical awareness, and deep knowledge as the goal for all students. Despite a dearth of cognitively complex feedback, teachers always seem to make do, inviting peers into their classrooms to observe—e.g. by using Pineapple Charts—or offering new perspectives on which aspects of their teaching work well for their students, and which might need improvement—e.g. through Lesson Study. All things considered, teacher research and practitioner inquiry scholars Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle point out in their book Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation, that one of the major goals of teacher inquiry is to assist in renegotiating the relationship between research, policy, and practice.

The second intra-group conversation whose transcript appears below differs significantly from the first and demonstrates that students can teach each other, given the right, yet less than ideal, conditions. East Asian students in Dialogic Groups 008 and 012 diverge in behaviors among themselves, demonstrating once again that race and ethnicity do not determine mindset, and that silence may not necessarily be a sign of ‘need for closure.’ In my qualitative analysis, I describe the meaning-making capacities of two different intra-group attempts at collaborative conversation: in the first, as we’ve seen, students strongly exhibit ‘need for closure;’ but in the second, as we shall see, students appear more comfortable with the ‘dynamic-learning frame.’

Literature Circle Dialogic Group 012—Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov (2:20 min.)

(Anthony [Artist] is of Eastern European descent; Aryan [Bridge Builder] is of Bangladeshi descent; Janat [Discussion Leader] is of Central Asian descent; and Jonathan [Reporter] is of Chinese descent, as is Carlin [Diction Detective]. The group consists of two female students—Janat and Carlin—and three male students.)

Anthony: Humbert is jealous of Lolita going out with people her own age.

Aryan: And Humbert disagrees with her and tries to get with her, Lolita.

Anthony: ’Cause she goes to camp, doesn’t she? And she sees a lot of people and starts to interact with them, and she starts to get this into her head like, Should I still be with Humbert? Like, Is this rational?

Janat: Keep in mind that she is a nymphet, and so nymphets tend to just be sexually attracted to others regardless of age, whether it’s towards older men or men... So, yeah. So, also keep that in mind. (Silence). My first question is: What does Lolita enjoy in her relationship with older men? What do you think she has to gain by this?

Jonathan: Oh, she asks for like money, and I think she wants sex, so then if he wants to be with her, he’ll have to supply her.
Aryan: Like Lolita constantly depends on like gifts and money…

Janat: That was the direction I saw her moving in.

Anthony: She’s like, feed me, I’m hungry; she’s like… she considers them to be lovers, but they’re not at the same time; she’s treating, she’s treating him, she’s treating him like he’s… (inaudible).

Janat: Yes.

Anthony: She’s always like, Aww, my knee is hurting, I’m really hungry. Can we go somewhere out to eat now, please, please? And she begs him until he takes her.

Janat: Eventually, what she seeks is a provider.

Anthony: Yeah.

Janat: Which brings me to the next question: Do you think Lolita loves Humbert, or is she just using him?

Carlin: She’s just using him.

Anthony: Yeah.

Janat: I agree. I feel this is just a manipulation tactic that she’s using ’cause… (To Carlin). Can I see the quote that you wrote down? (Silence). That’s good. So, here we see, “You revolting creature, I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you’ve done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh you, dirty, dirty, old man.” So, in a sense, this could be a turning point, or a flirting game, but I felt as though this was kind of like her reminding him that the power now lies with her, and in this way, she now has… she’s able to manipulate him through…fear. He’s afraid of what could happen when this sick relation is released; if not, she gets her money, she gets her presents, she gets all of that, and because she’s a nymphet, she’s also comfortable with the amount of sexual desires that he has.

Anthony: I remember that we said that Lolita is in an incredible position because she’s the one who avoids being on a guilt trip, so everything is directed towards Humbert because…

Aryan: (Inaudible one word response).

Anthony: Yes…since he’s the older one in the relationship, and she’s the minor, he’s the one in a sense who takes all the blame, right, and he’s in no position to argue, and Lolita, of course, she takes advantage of that.

Studies show that since the early 1990’s, girls and young women in the United States and most other highly developed countries have outpaced their male counterparts in self-discipline and self-control, qualities which in turn have positively impacted academic achievement (Quenzel and Hurrelmann). According to researchers Quenzel and Hurrelmann, the superior drive of young
women has even led to a “reversal of gender-specific inequality patterns.” Today, young women, as a group, more so than young men, tend to develop “an autonomous value and norm orientation and an ethical and political conscience that is in line with [their] behaviour and actions. Sociologically speaking, this concerns the responsible adoption of participation roles as a citizen in the cultural and political sphere with the aim of securing the integration of the individual into the cultural and political reproduction process of a democratic society” (Quenzel & Hurrelmann). Without doubt, the presence of two young women in Dialogic Group 012 positively affected the dynamics of their intra-group discussion. In fact, “the responsible adoption of participation roles as a citizen,” as evidenced by the two young women in this group, correlates with their capacity for collaboration, leading to self-empowerment and their subsequent adoption of contributive roles within their group, ethically, socially, and politically. Interestingly, the raised levels of civic engagement that Quenzel and Hurrelmann identify among young women since the 1990's is also a stated goal of SEL and dialogic classrooms. As Johnston states, “[c]ooperative classrooms […] foster more positive relationships, […] and these generalize beyond academic settings to free-choice interactions” (2012: 108-9), the “sort of ability [that] is fundamental to democratic living” (2012: 110).

Anthony doesn’t wait for Janat, the Discussion Leader, to ask a question before launching into a psychological analysis of the main characters of the novel, an analysis that Aryan corroborates by rephrasing Anthony’s assertion, and on which Janat later concurs. Aryan’s subsequent comment elicits a response from Janat and successfully relaunches the discussion. Anthony furthermore speaks of Lolita as being conflicted, torn between her attraction for males of her peer group and her attraction for Humbert. Janat, who responds directly to Anthony, points out in turn that Lolita’s promiscuity is an essential facet of her genotype, according to Humbert’s classification. From the outset, Anthony, Janat, and Aryan directly engage each other, while Jonathan and Carlin, the only East Asians, benefit from “authoring.” Although their contributions to the conversation are limited to direct responses to Janat’s queries, they have been, as Townsend would say, “doing important mental work,” as evidenced particularly by the textual support that Carlin cites to support her analysis. For Jonathan and Carlin, dialogic discussion norms are facilitated, as Tateishi noted, by the presence of a discussion leader and a small group dialogic situation. Moreover, the fact that Carlin has internalized those norms to some degree is noteworthy, for her observed behaviors contrast sharply with ‘the need for closure’ of the two male East Asian students in Group 008. While East Asian cultural differences regarding public speaking may hinder adherence to the progressive norms of the dialogic classroom, they are not racially determined, nor in turn do they determine mindset; other factors are in play: gender, for example. Carlin, the East Asian female in Group 012, seems to adhere to the ‘dynamic-learning frame’ more than her ethnicity would otherwise suggest. In other words, the tendency of male and female East Asian students to be relatively silent participants in classroom conversations is an observed fact, but their East Asian ethnicity cannot be causally linked to ‘need for closure.’ Shyness, for example, may also play a role in curtailing oral participation, but whether a student possesses a fixed mindset or a growth mindset will make a difference relative to overcoming it (see Dweck, 6:00-6:02). Moreover, in Dialogic Group 012, gender appears as a marker that distinguishes an East Asian female student from her male peers inasmuch as her contribution is evidence that she is capable of engaging in important mental work while remaining relatively quiet,
notwithstanding that the extent to which other factors contribute to or limit that outcome remains unclear.

In Group 012, all the students contribute to the discussion. No one is left out. Granted, Anthony and Janat are the dominant voices, but others contribute significantly to the analysis of the text. We note the absence of any self-effacing gestures as in Group 008. Here, the students implicitly accept the notion that full participation in productive collaborative dialogue benefits everyone “because it is self-serving as well as other-serving” (Johnston, 2012: 106). Their ‘enlightened self-interest’ moreover locates within their diversity as a group the source of their innovation (Johnston, 2012: 6 and 106). The students uncover together how Humbert and Lolita’s perspectives intersect and veer off, supporting their analysis with explicit textual evidence. Because the students in Group 012 were able to sustain their “social interdependence,” their “self-esteem, time on task, attitudes toward task, quality of reasoning, and perspective taking” were all greatly enhanced (Johnston, 2012: 109). In fact, Janat’s questions as Discussion Leader appear to arise logically out of the group’s analysis, rather than signal frustration at the group’s faltering achievement, as in Peter’s case, or “impatience at the inconclusive nature of personal interpretation,” as is the case for Jason and Townsend’s informant. Group 012’s “failure” to demonstrate expert knowledge during their two-minute conversation however is not a failure of the ‘dynamic-learning frame.’ Rather, as cognitive psychologist Daniel T. Willingham has asserted in *Why Don’t Students Like School?* the creation of expert “new knowledge” on the part of students cannot be the goal; instead, teachers should strive for students’ “deep understanding” (163). Moreover, Willingham states that teachers should always make “deep knowledge” their goal, but they must “recognize that shallow knowledge will come first” (163). Dialogic Group 012 may have missed an important argument which *n + 1* editor Mark Greif makes in his essay “Afternoon of the Sex Children,” i.e. that “[t]he late novels were Nabokov’s allegories of the seductions of aestheticism, which transfigures the forbidden into the beautiful; or moral paintings of our acceptance of crime, when crime is presented alluringly. So love of the wrong object becomes a metaphor for art, ethics, personality, and so forth” (103). But so what? They already did their fair share of work, since, as Johnston avers, students who engage in dialogic interactions in “[c]ooperative classrooms […] foster more positive relationships, including across ethnic groups and between handicapped and nonhandicapped students, and these generalize beyond academic settings to free-choice interactions” (108-9), the “sort of ability [that] is fundamental to democratic living” (110). I can only imagine how Jingfan would have fared had he been a member of Dialogic Group 012.

Consequently, assessing student learning for such complex knowledge requires more than mere multiple-choice exams with discreet answer choices. The assessment I devised for this purpose is a collaborative argument essay where each student contributes the fruits of his or her literary analysis as evidence to support the team’s thesis statement. (Accommodations can be made for younger students). The written essay must be coherent and cohesive; and it must demonstrate equal participation among the members of the team. In addition, students are called upon to develop a multimedia presentation of 10-12 minutes during which the team makes its case to the class and fields questions from peers and the teacher. Students thus engage in an authentic assessment that
focuses not only on the students’ intellectual achievements and skill sets, but also their social and emotional needs, i.e. their ability to work together as a team and cogently and succinctly present their findings to a live audience about something of critical interest to them.

Although all students stand to benefit from actively collaborating in a dialogic classroom—\textit{viz} a global worldview and feeling at ease with complexity, multiple perspectives, and uncertainty, many resist adopting a ‘dynamic-learning frame’ because, as Willingham writes, their resistance is also physiological: STEM students, for example, may be naturally curious, but they may not be naturally good thinkers (163). Striving for deep understanding must be deliberate and goes against the grain. High-stakes testing culture, where answers are either right or wrong, encourages students to rely on their skills as test-takers to perform well, rather than explore novel possibilities, and may also prejudice student beliefs about intelligence that will induce them to adopt a ‘fixed-performance frame.’

**Testing Culture and SEL**

As stated earlier, Johnston thinks that ‘need for closure’ is socialized and situational. At a large, competitive STEM high school, for example, stress induced by high-stakes testing culture can also exacerbate ‘need for closure’ among students, as Dialogic Group 008’s transcript above may suggest, notwithstanding efforts by the teacher to create classroom conditions that favor dialogue. Indeed, high-stakes testing culture may explain better than any other factor why NextGeners are so stressed, anxiety-ridden, and depressed since NextGeners have never known anything but high-stakes testing for their entire academic careers (“Generation Z is stressed, depressed and exam-obsessed”).

In a nationally top-ranked STEM high school, a moderate amount of stress is a good motivator for students to perform well on numerous high-stakes tests. They know that competitive academic rankings are tied to their scores on them. Adherence to either a ‘fixed-performance frame’ or a ‘dynamic-learning frame’ does not appear to make much difference at this point. Of course, they study, yet, because they are good test takers, they rely on their skills as test-takers to do well; as long as they perform well, they continue to derive a high degree of emotional satisfaction from the experience. However, the flipside is that high-stakes standardized testing culture has generated an unprecedented and unsustainable amount of stress for NextGeners and may have increased the incidence of ‘need for closure’ as a result.

Being concerned more with choosing the correct answer than with learning may enable students to perform well on multiple-choice tests (of which high-stakes standardized tests are a variant) because they can focus on finding the correct answer, but it diminishes the possibility of their personal expressiveness or self-actualization by making irrelevant the “inconclusive nature of personal interpretation.” The eminent education historian Diane Ravitch has been making the point for years, “As a teaching tool, the tests are deeply flawed because they quash imagination, creativity, and divergent thinking. These are mental habits we should encourage, not punish” (Ravitch). In addition, standardized tests are not good indicators of future outcomes. As Dweck points out, “Test scores and measures of achievement tell you where a student is, but not where a student will end up” (2:15:45-53). Once the bar is raised, and discreet multiple-choice assessments are unavailable,
stress-induced ‘need for closure’ will hinder a student’s ability to learn from past mistakes, persist in the face of the ‘inconclusive nature of argument,’ or remain ‘open to possibilities that reject definitive resolution’ (see Dweck).

Students with ‘high need for closure’ willingly forego developing a deeper understanding on many issues that involve thinking, meaning-making, or setbacks, and so their prospects for happiness are expedient and short-term. Of course, not all students at a competitive high school respond to the rigors of high-stakes testing culture with ‘need for closure.’ In fact, students who remain open to a range of possibilities and are able to entertain multiple perspectives without ‘need for closure’ learn valuable lessons about constructing meaning and purpose for themselves and are to be commended and encouraged. Those students will likely develop into happier individuals, since they stand a greater chance of using their education to broaden their horizons and live a “full life,” according to positive psychologist Martin Seligman’s definition (Seligman).

**Happiness and SEL**

Clearly, preparing students for the future entails more than imparting academic knowledge. But while some stakeholders maintain that instilling confidence, teaching youth to deal effectively with stress and difficult situations in life, and instructing them to solve disagreements in a positive way is the competence of home education, not all young adults are groomed for high emotional intelligence or to get along and/or work with people different from them. Far too many grow up harboring a fixed mindset that limits their interactions with others, prevents them from actualizing their potential, and impoverishes civic discourse. As Dweck and Johnston imply, a ‘dynamic-learning frame’ can be remediated in the classroom through SEL. Accomplishing the task of opening minds requires that teachers intentionally choose their words wisely and create the conditions for dialogue to occur, and yet young people tell us that as a society we are falling short. *Respected: Perspectives of Youth on High School & Social and Emotional Learning,* a report written by Karen Niemi and others for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), and published in 2018 states that:

> too often even in schools where high-quality SEL programming is present, it is not being embedded into and across classrooms effectively (Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, Weissberg, 2016). Schools must intentionally and actively integrate social, emotional and academic learning with instruction on specific skills and competencies. This includes integrating relevant examples of academic subjects intersecting with social and emotional competencies in lessons and designing opportunities for students to engage their SEL skills. Instruction should affirm diversity and seek to address stereotypes or inequities that may arise in instruction or communities (Niemi et al. 7).

According to the study, less than 20 percent of young adults polled thought that their school did a “great job” in helping them develop a set of seven essential SEL skills: 1) knowing how to get along/work with people different from you; 2) feeling confident in yourself; 3) understanding other people’s feelings/views; 4) knowing how to solve disagreements in a positive way; 5) understanding
your own emotions and why you feel different emotions; 6) dealing with difficult situations in your life; and 7) knowing how to deal with stress (Niemi et al. 31).

And yet, as this inquiry would suggest, student capacity to internalize SEL constitutes the gateway to happiness not least of all because it promotes empathy, which as Muhammad notes, “is the essence of what it means to be human” (118). Restoring humanity to education is also the goal of Soka (Value-Creating) education, an educational praxis whose primary objective is the lifelong happiness of children, and whose philosophical foundations were consolidated by the renowned Japanese education philosopher Daisaku Ikeda (Ikeda, 2018). Ikeda defines ‘happiness’ as the “ability to persevere through any hardship.” So, the purpose of education is “to foster people who [can] forge their own happiness and positive value” by engaging in dialogue and contributing to the creative coexistence of our communities (Ikeda, 1993 and 2001). Hence, Ikeda regards people who strive to ‘open’ themselves over the course of their lifetimes as “global citizens,” a concept which resonates with Seligman’s “full life” (2001). However, as the adage goes, we value what we measure: high-stakes multiple-choice exams were designed as accountability measures, but they clearly restrict the development of a ‘dynamic-learning frame’ and the promotion of deep understanding and empathy among students.

Besides an obsession with high-stakes testing culture, another reason why schools are doing such a poor job at “intentionally and actively [integrating] social, emotional and academic learning with instruction on specific skills and competencies” is that, in my view, teacher evaluations are not set up to provide nuanced feedback to educators about how to restore purpose to education, or teach students to believe that they possess unlimited potential, that hard work and commitment pay off, and that participation in a diverse dialogic learning community improves their prospects. Teacher evaluation systems linked to high-stakes tests—via controversial value-added models (VAMs), as well as more traditional classroom observations—are designed to reward or punish teachers according to whether students meet arbitrary accountability benchmarks, but fail to promote the social-emotional work being carried out in our nation’s classrooms with the aim of ‘opening minds.’ Ultimately, our collective failure to embed high-quality SEL programming in our classrooms, and thus ‘humanize’ our educational mission (see Muhammed 117-119), is due in part to the shortcomings of our teacher evaluation systems.

**Teacher Evaluation and SEL**

Charlotte Danielson, the author of *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching*, which has been adopted by numerous school districts, both internationally and in the United States, including New York City’s Department of Education (NYCDOE), has expressed her consternation at how teachers are now being evaluated. “I’m deeply troubled,” she wrote in *Education Week*, “by the transformation of teaching from a complex profession requiring nuanced judgment to the performance of certain behaviors that can be ticked off on a checklist” (2016). Danielson is referring to NYCDOE’s pared down use of her Framework. She understands that the failure of our teacher evaluation system traduces individual teachers and the teaching profession, and harms students. Often, she states, evaluators will lack the wherewithal to “make accurate judgments” about teacher
effectiveness, “[b]ut since evaluators must assign a score, teaching is distilled to numbers, ratings, and rankings, conveying a reductive nature to educators’ professional worth and undermining their overall confidence in the system” (2016). For the record, my supervisor and I enjoy a rigorous, open, and honest professional relationship based on mutual respect, dialogue, and constructive feedback—although over my long career as a teacher that has not always been the case. Nonetheless, she must abide by the strictures of NYCDOE’s pared down checklist. No surprise then that many teachers lack the nuanced feedback they need to improve their integration of SEL, sustain dialogic antiracist learning environments in their classrooms, or address the principles of mind that Willingham discusses in Why Don’t Students Like School?

When Danielson’s Framework was phased in system-wide by NYCDOE in 2013, incentivized by the Obama-era federal grant program Race To The Top, supervisors and administrators were required to observe all 22 components of Danielson’s Framework. Implementing a system of classroom observations that had to account for 22 distinct components of teacher effectiveness proved to be overwhelming and unmanageable for supervisors and administrators, so pushback from the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA) and voices within NYCDOE, at a particularly contentious moment in the history of labor relations, was swift and effective. Practically overnight, the number of components that administrators had to account for was reduced to eight, and the rationale for doing so was enshrined in the legalese of the Education Department’s Advance teacher evaluation system, “Advance uses a focused (italics mine) version of Charlotte Danielson’s (2013) Framework for Teaching, and [w]hile the entire Danielson Framework for Teaching may be used for formative purposes (italics mine), teachers will only receive ratings on […] eight prioritized (italics mine) components” (Advance 2019-2020). This gutting of the Danielson Framework by NYCDOE has contributed to the “transformation of teaching from a complex profession requiring nuanced judgment to the performance of certain behaviors that can be ticked off on a checklist,” which Danielson decried in her 2016 article. Substituting convenience for nuanced feedback represents a costly and misguided regression to the factory model of education, more suited perhaps for making widgets, but not for educating all NextGeners to speak, think, and collaborate in a diverse community of learners.

Of the four domains and 22 components that A Framework for Teaching identifies as key for enhancing professional practice, NYCDOE cherry-picked eight, or 36 percent, and they are: 1a—Demonstrating Knowledge of Content and Pedagogy; 1e—Designing Coherent Instruction; 2a—Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport; 2d—Managing Student Behavior; 3b—Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques; 3c—Engaging Students in Learning; 3d—Providing Feedback to Students; and 4e—Growing and Developing Professionally. The omissions have, for all intents and purposes, removed Danielson’s focus on SEL. That becomes especially clear once we consider the short shrift given to the common themes running through the four domains: equity, cultural sensitivity, high expectations, developmental appropriateness, accommodating students with special needs, and appropriate use of technology. The commitment to equity is found particularly in Domains 2 and 3 of A Framework for Teaching. Danielson adamantly insists that public schools must provide “high quality” education to all “[t]hose who have been underserved […] [that is] primarily
students of color, particularly in urban areas, and females, particularly in science and mathematics” (1996: 33). For NYCDOE, Component 2a apparently does the trick, even as “restoring equity and excellence in today’s classrooms” remains one of the foremost challenges facing our public school system. And yet, “rapport” in a diverse learning environment implies awareness of and respect for “intercultural” differences—between teacher and students and among students. Those are ideas, Danielson writes, which must find “a thoughtful reception” in a culture of and for learning. Danielson addresses that nexus in Component 2b: Establishing a Culture for Learning; NYCDOE, however, discreetly omitted it from its prioritized evaluation checklist.

Danielson considers her framework to be one among many possible frameworks—“a framework for teaching,” not “the framework for teaching”—all of which have the potential to complement each other. Gholdy Muhammad has proposed such a one in Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy. By overlaying Muhammad’s four-tiered HRL Framework onto Danielson’s Framework for Teaching, I will illustrate how much valuable feedback teachers and students have actually lost due to NYCDOE’s push to strip away the SEL-related components of Danielson’s evaluation system in the name of convenience and efficiency. Muhammad’s four-tiered “pursuits,” as she calls them, are: identity, skills, intellect, and criticality.

Because ‘equity for all’ is the shared goal, Muhammad’s four-tiered HRL framework has focused on the historically underserved, namely Black and Brown students, just as Danielson had advocated. She writes, “[T]he curricula, books, and mandated frameworks used across the nation are not usually designed for Black and Brown children, and these are the populations who have been underserved by education the most” (Muhammad 66). And she continues, “Our goal is not just to help students become better test takers or academic achievers, but also for them to gain the confidence to use learning as a personal and sociopolitical tool to thrive in this world and to help them know themselves. This is why identity development is the first of the four pursuits in the HRL Framework” (Muhammad 68). Muhammad and Danielson both affirm that knowledge of students is a critical first step toward facilitating identity development in students, all students, including East Asians. Component 1b: Demonstrating Knowledge of Students of Danielson’s Framework clearly lays out the elements designed to enhance identity development in students: knowledge not only of the characteristics of an age group or of how to accommodate students with special needs, but also “knowledge of the interests or cultural heritage of each student” (Danielson, 1996: 67). However, NYCDOE’s pared down checklist omits Component 1b, as well as many others. As a result, there is no doubt that NYCDOE’s teacher evaluation system fails to promote equity, despite lip service to the contrary, or provide feedback to teachers about enhancing social-emotional learning because it disregards the scholarship that informs the frameworks which serve as the foundation of its policy.

Component 1c: Selecting Instructional Goals of the Danielson Framework asks that teachers “adjust their instructional goals to accommodate the diversity represented by their students” (68). Hence, Danielson notes that instructional goals must not be of only one type. Certainly, some goals should reflect “factual knowledge or conceptual understanding” and “reasoning skills,” but others should address “social skills, or communication,” and still others should include “dispositions, such
as a willingness to listen to all points of view” or “taking pride in one’s work” (69). Here, Danielson cross-references Component 2b: Establishing a Culture for Learning and makes a strong case for SEL. Muhammad’s four-tiered HRL Framework touches upon similar goals: the “pursuit of identity,” first and foremost; next, “skills” which “denote competence, ability, and expertise” in factual knowledge, conceptual understanding, oral and written communication, and intercultural proficiency (Muhammad 85). For Black people in the United States, Muhammad writes, those skills historically served, and must again serve, a greater purpose, namely that of “conduits to liberation” (89), and Danielson would agree. The “pursuit of intellect,” moreover, by historically Black literary societies constituted an act of resistance against oppression and inhumane treatment (Muhammad 102). “Reasoning” and debating, therefore, are intellectual pursuits that have social justice as their aim:

The HRL Framework starts with identity and skills because if these two pursuits are developed, the possibility is created for intellect, and when students develop intellectualism, they can express their ideas, work through justice-centered solutions to the world’s problems, and expand their mental capacities. […] Intellect includes what we want our students to be smarter about, but also creates a space for students to apply their learning in authentic ways connected to the world. […]. This is why we must rethink the texts we place in front of students. Texts must be intellectually energizing enough to cultivate the genius inside of students. […]. [I]ntellectualism again is connected to happiness, which is the hope of our children and an inalienable right. […]. Learning and working to improve the human condition helps students foster their emotional intelligence and helps to cultivate their hearts (Muhammad 104-05, 108, 111).

NYCDOE’s checklist for teacher “performance” ratings limits feedback to teachers on all of these accounts, so SEL often falls by the wayside as if by design. Missing, too, are other components in Danielson’s Framework that address SEL, intellect, and identity—1d: Demonstrating Knowledge of Resources; 3a: Communicating Clearly and Accurately; and 3e: Demonstrating Flexibility and Responsiveness. Component 1d considers whether teachers deliberately seek “other materials to enhance instruction” and dovetails with Muhammad’s call for teachers to rethink what texts they use in the classroom and how they ask students to engage with those texts. Danielson writes, “Students’ full potential can only be realized if their teachers are aware of what is available” (1996: 71). Component 3a considers whether teachers carefully foster their students’ intellect by their choice of words and the tone of language they use to express themselves, “Teachers’ language should also reflect a careful choice of words and a vocabulary suitable to the richness of a discipline” (Danielson, 1996: 90). Teachers’ ears must be attuned to the social context in which particular words and phrases assume specific and even coded meanings within a given discipline (see Johnston, 2004: 87ff). Consider the lone example of how fraught with angst is the task of critically acknowledging the presence of the N-word in texts of American Literature. Component 3e gauges “teachers’ sense of efficacy and commitment to the learning of all students,” whether they can make adjustments to a lesson on the fly if it’s not working, build on spontaneous (usually controversial) current events, or try alternative approaches when students experience difficulty learning a topic without scapegoating
“the students, the home environment, or the larger culture for the deficiency” (Danielson, 1996: 103). Responsiveness and flexibility effectively monitor the degree to which all kinds of “deficit thinking” are banned from the classroom (Muhammad 103). At any rate, because teachers largely lack feedback in these areas, SEL integration remains sporadic and, as a result, students lack effective encouragement to find purpose in education and stem their “flight from learning.”

Component 3a: Engaging Students in Learning is at the heart of Danielson’s Framework for Teaching. NYCDOE, in fact, retains this component in its evaluation checklist, albeit divorced from the other relevant components that foster SEL integration into academics. As a result, teachers can easily lose their advantage. In her rationale and explanation, Danielson defines ‘student engagement’ as “intellectual involvement with the content, or active construction of understanding” (95). In other words, teachers must create learning situations where students, as well as the teachers themselves, experience an “invested participation” (95). Danielson calls for “mental engagement,” or a “minds-on” approach, and of utmost importance for deep understanding is how “content is presented, or represented to students,” consonant with Johnston’s methods for promoting a ‘dynamic-learning frame,’ and anticipating Muhammad’s pursuit of ‘criticality.’ True ‘mental engagement,’ or in Muhammad’s terms ‘criticality,’ demands that students and teachers work together towards an understanding of “power, entitlement, oppression, and equity” (Muhammad 120). Depth over breadth should be emphasized, for activities and assignments must “challenge students to search for underlying causes, explain their thinking, and justify a position” (Danielson 96). Students must be taught how to solve problems, exercise choice, devise their own approaches, formulate questions, design investigations, conduct research, interrogate sources, entertain multiple perspectives, find patterns, test hypotheses, and avoid easy answers (Danielson 96). Danielson shuns “easy answers” because she is critical of the adherence to what Johnston later called the ‘seize and freeze’ mentality typical of a ‘fixed-performance frame.’ Muhammad’s pursuit of ‘criticality’ also calls for teachers and students “to avoid being passive consumers of knowledge and information,” but instead to “read the world with a critical eye, refusing to accept unexamined information as factual or true” (122). And she goes on to write that “[c]riticality pushes questioning of information and the source of the information—and this source may include the teacher” (122). True dialogue calls for interlocutors to be willing to risk something of themselves, to place themselves on the line, to accept challenges to their beliefs and worldviews, to question their assumptions, to be vulnerable without shame. No easy answers here. “Activities and assignments designed for maximum student engagement,” writes Danielson, “represent relevant and authentic applications of knowledge” (97). And authentic applications of knowledge call for action plans. Similarly, Muhammad’s criticality seeks to empower students to “see, name, and interrogate the world not only to make sense of injustice but also to work toward social transformation […] and ultimately have the agency to build a better world for all” (120). Because we, as education professionals, have an ethical obligation to reject reifying cultural differences into racist hierarchies, we might begin, as Muhammad suggests, by adopting historically and culturally responsive frameworks and practices as regards the most underserved populations in order to understand “the ideologies and perspectives of marginalized communities (especially Black populations all over the world) and their ways of knowing and experiencing the world” (Muhammad 120). In conclusion, as Mark Greenberg, professor of human development and
psychology at Pennsylvania State University and co-founder of CASEL, contends, “[S]ustained implementation and change in classrooms requires leadership and ongoing support” (qtd. in Will, 2020).

Conclusion

One of the cornerstones of “global citizenship” calls for “[t]he courage not to fear or deny difference, but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures and to grow from encounters with them” (Ikeda, 2008: 444). By demonstrating knowledge of students we come to know ourselves, a liberating experience. Fear and denial hamper the development of a ‘dynamic-learning frame’ and instead contribute to ‘need for closure.’ Dialogic classrooms promote equity, empathy, resilience, humanity, and happiness. The courage to reject cultural imperialism must lead moreover to advocating for deliberate policy actions that dismantle cultural hierarchies and cultural racism through equitable funding of SEL, diminish student stress, and provide teachers with the feedback they need to do the work.

Works Cited


