Teachers as Agents of Change
Coaching Guide

Module Summary

In this module, teachers will:
- Contrast the identity of “teacher as technician” with “teacher as agent of change.”
- Identify key dispositions and mindsets needed to act as a change agent.
- Operationalize the role of change agent by enacting culturally responsive teaching practices.

Module activities: In this module, teachers will learn about the differences between operating as a “technician” and operating as an agent of change in the service of equity. They will learn how change agents are culturally responsive in the content they teach, the methods they use, and the relationships they build with students and families. The module provides a tool with several ideas for enacting culturally responsive practices, and contains in-depth interviews with real life teachers who describe how they apply these strategies in their classrooms.

Key Takeaways

Essential knowledge:
- It is important to understand the differences between “teacher as technician” and “teacher as agent of change.”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technicians</th>
<th>Agents of Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believe that schools are politically neutral spaces.</td>
<td>Believe that schools and the broader society are interconnected, and that teaching is a political act.</td>
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<td>Believe that schools function as a meritocracy.</td>
<td>Believe that schools can either reproduce or challenge social inequities.</td>
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<td>Believe that good teaching is the effective deployment of different technical skills (e.g. planning, assessment).</td>
<td>Believe that technical skills are necessary but not sufficient for good teaching.</td>
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<td>Believe that their job is to implement the curriculum.</td>
<td>Believe that their job is to help students develop the knowledge and skills they need to acquire power in their own lives.</td>
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- One way that teachers can act as change agents is through the use of culturally responsive pedagogy: a pedagogical perspective that places students’ social and cultural identities at the center of one’s teaching, and uses the cultural characteristics and experiences of diverse students to teach them more effectively.
- Culturally responsive pedagogy can be enacted in three distinct domains: content, pedagogy, and relationships.

Essential skill:
- Here are some culturally responsive practices that teachers can use when choosing the content they teach, the methods they use, and the relationships they form with students and families.
  - Content: Choose content that is relevant, and rooted in topics and issues that are most relevant to students’ lives; choose content that disrupts or actively combats stereotypes and biases.
    - Relevance should be based on what the teacher learns about students (and their lives and interests) rather than what the teacher assumes to be true about students.
  - Methods: Involve students in the construction of knowledge; whenever possible, build on students’ background knowledge and strengths; engage students in problem-posing inquiry.
  - Relationships: Operate with empathy, and try to understand and share students’ concerns; connect with families to determine what students need to succeed; demonstrate authentic caring.

Essential mindsets:
- Being a change agent is not about changing students; it’s about changing systems and practices that keep students from reaching their full potential.
- The process of becoming a culturally responsive teacher is one of learning how to see your classroom through the eyes of your students. Then, adjusting your instructional practices to ensure that all students are affirmed and supported.
The Skill in Action

A teacher seeking to operate as an agent of change may demonstrate the following behaviors and characteristics:

- Whenever possible, he or she teaches standards-based knowledge and skills through content that is relevant and engaging to students.
- The teacher supplements mandated curriculum content with examples, texts, music, film, etc. that links the content to student background knowledge, interests, or concerns.
- The teacher does not over-rely on lecturing as an instructional technique; students construct knowledge through dialogue, discussion, and the collaborative investigation of different questions.
- The teacher frequently engages in dialogue with students and asks questions to learn more about them.
- During instruction, the teacher makes connections between new content and students’ background knowledge and experience with various topics.
- The teacher knows something about each student’s hobbies, interests, and identity (i.e. the most important things that make me me).
- The teacher knows something about each student’s family and living situation.
- The teacher approaches any conflict or potential conflict (i.e. with a student, with parents) as an opportunity to learn. He or she begins by asking questions to seek understanding.
- The teacher does not blame students for academic or behavioral problems in the classroom, but seeks to understand how his or her own actions may be contributing to it, and how he or she can work with students to solve it.

Questions for Discussion

The following is a list of suggested questions for engaging in a reflective dialogue with the teacher, either before or after he or she attempts to implement the skill.

For some teachers, the information in this module may create some cognitive dissonance. This is when a person receives information that seems to question or contradict a previously-held belief. Cognitive dissonance can lead to growth in one’s consciousness and perspective. Here are some questions that can help teachers work through (possible) cognitive dissonance, as well as debrief the content of the module:

- What was your reaction to this module? What stood out to you?
- How do you understand the difference between “teacher as technician” and “teacher as agent of change”?
- In what ways did the content of the module connect to your own experiences as a teacher or student?
- Was any of the information challenging for you? In what way?
- Which of the actions suggested in the resource do you think you could begin to implement right away? Which do you think you might need help with?
- How can I help you moving forward?

If you are going to debrief the module in a group or PLC, be sure to establish some norms or mutual commitments before beginning the discussion. Some helpful norms might be:

- Speak your own truth, but do not attempt to speak on behalf of others.
- Consider the impact of your words on others.
- Recognize that someone’s words may affect you in a way that is different from what was intended.
- Seek to understand the perspectives of others.
- Don’t make assumptions about what other people think/feel/believe. Ask questions.
- Stay engaged.

Standards

InTASC:

9(i) The teacher understands how personal identity, worldview, and prior experience affect perceptions and expectations, and recognizes how they may bias behaviors and interactions with others.

9(m) The teacher is committed to deepening understanding of his/her own frames of reference (e.g., culture, gender, language, abilities, ways of knowing), the potential biases in these frames, and their impact on expectations for and relationships with learners and their families.