



# Cahn

**DISTINGUISHED  
PRINCIPALS FELLOWSHIP**

All Aboard? Initiating, Maintaining, and Sustaining Culturally Relevant Education in a Diverse  
Community

Robert Bonilla, Fellow, and Danielle Descarfino, Ally

PS 217 Colonel David Marcus School  
1100 Newkirk Ave.  
Brooklyn, NY 11230

2022 Cahn Cohort

## ABSTRACT

What's the difference between working in a diverse school and doing the work in a diverse school? Navigating our community's complex cultural nuances and helping everyone come together is a process that was initiated eight years ago and we are still on the path of discovery. We believe that culturally responsive and sustaining education is the best way to provide our uniquely diverse student population with a deeper understanding of our world and themselves.

During the recent years, we have taken actions to align our school community of students, staff, and parents centered around a focus on CRSE. This has involved professional learning for school staff, library audits, teacher-created cultural units of study, and an Equity Team of staff and parents. In this project, we explore what steps are necessary in shifting our school approach to meaningful and intentional culturally relevant and sustaining education.

## INTRODUCTION

Our Cahn project focuses on taking steps to shift the culture of our diverse school community to a mindset of meaningful Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE). We decided on this goal after a series of events underscored the need to assess our school culture. In 2021, PS 217 formed an Equity Team of staff and parents. Since the formation of the Equity Team, we have taken many intentional steps to involve and impact staff, parents, and students in our journey towards CRSE.

One outcome is in providing educational opportunities to professionally develop the entire school staff in CRSE, which is still in progress. Another important outcome has been our

collaborative cultural events which have become a source of pride for everyone in the school community. Most importantly, we seek an outcome to create high quality educational experiences and learning environments for our students that will foster academic success, cross-cultural competence, and develop critical consciousness for all learners.

PS 217 is an elementary school located in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn. The population of approximately 1,000 students is highly diverse with 53% Asian/Pacific Islander, 18% White, 17% Hispanic, and 8% Black. About 33% of the student population are English Language Learners and 76% low-income families.

When Mr. Bonilla began his principalship at PS 217 in 2016 and examined the big picture, he saw a school with a lot of communities represented, but an inequitable and segregated program in place. The longstanding “Eagle” program which offered a vaguely special class with a gifted label implied by the class symbol and mantra of soaring above the rest. It was clear at first glance that Eagle rosters were made up students who were White or of higher socioeconomic status, begging a reexamination of John Dewey’s century-old question, do schools reflect the inequitable society we live in?

We discovered that admission to the Eagle program was granted to parents who showed a receipt to prove their children had taken the Gifted and Talented assessment. After uncovering this inequitable system, Mr. Bonilla began to phase out the program despite pushback from some parents representing a small part of the school population, but with the loudest voices.

While the Eagle program was intact, academic assessment data revealed uneven student achievement across grades. After eliminating the program, we have balance and consistency in

student achievement across classes. However, dismantling the Eagle program was just the first stop on our school's road toward a much-needed reset in culture and mindset.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

School as we knew it changed during the pandemic, a time characterized by physical distance, political divisiveness, and fear. When the 2020-2021 school year began, more than half of the student population opted to learn remotely. The school community felt isolated and disjointed. In-person instruction meant sitting six feet apart and masks all day. Meanwhile, boundaries collapsed for remote learners. Living rooms, or kitchen tables, or even beds took the place of classrooms. The wide range of needs in our school community became glaring. After the murder of George Floyd as protests swept the nation, racial tensions flared, social media blazed on, and parents began to question the integrity of the educators they were entrusting with their children.

#### **Equity Team Formed**

In response to these challenges, a school Equity Team of administrators, staff, and parents was formed. This team met regularly to build relationships, create equity-based goals, take action, and discuss progress. Over time, the team developed trust and an open, vulnerable environment which strengthened relationships and fostered honest discussion. Together, we brainstormed and prioritized projects to promote equity.

We believe that culturally responsive and sustaining education is the best approach for our school community. CRSE values academic success, cross-cultural competence, and development of sociopolitical, critical consciousness. It allows our diverse student body to

capitalize on their cultures, identities, and experiences as strengths, and form deeper connections with their classmates and educators.

We knew that attaining true CRSE requires change and learning for all stakeholders. After forming the Equity team, we carefully considered our question: *What steps are necessary in shifting our school approach to meaningful and intentional culturally relevant and sustaining education?*

We utilized a range of tools to measure progress towards our various goals. For assessing curricular materials and classroom libraries, we used the NYU Curriculum Scorecard. For staff professional learning, we conducted a survey prior to the start of the CRSE Book Study and will measure growth when the study concludes.

## METHODS

The Equity Team worked together to identify problems, conduct research, plan actions, and discuss next steps. As we began this process, one challenge was working and meeting around pandemic restrictions, which meant that meetings took place on Zoom. While this was not most ideal, members demonstrated openness and commitment which helped us to stay focused and move our work forward. After the Equity Team, a series of actions were taken to educate staff about CRSE, design and implement cultural units of study, and foster collaboration with parents and the school community. Below outlines the steps we took chronologically.

- **Professional Learning Modules for PS 217 Staff, 2021-2023**

During the 2021-2022 school year, staff completed Implicit Bias modules during Professional Development hours. Teachers reported overall that this training was a positive and

thought-provoking experience. During the 2022-2023 school year, all staff completed the CRSE training modules.

- **Equity Team's First Library Audit, May 2022**

The Equity Team's first major project was conducting an in-person library audit using the NYU Curriculum Scorecard. This was a step in ensuring that curricular materials are culturally appropriate and reflective of student identities. Furthermore, learning about the process helped educators and parents to see books through a new lens and practice mindfulness about the impact of literature choice. We selected a sample of second grade mentor texts from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. One of the writers of the Scorecard provided a presentation on how to use it, then we moved on to our "scoring party" of reading and assessing the books.

During this event, some parents and staff members were surprised to encounter a culturally damaging text that had long been a staple of lower-grade classroom libraries. This surprising and vulnerable moment led many educators to realize how important it is to think critically about who our students are; the books we are using for instruction, reading aloud, and offering to them. Part of a teacher's role is thinking through this lens rather than blindly following a teacher guide or script.

- **Student Library Audit and Equity Team Presentation, May 2022**

After the Equity Team's library audit, we decided to involve students in thinking critically about the books. A sample of fifth grade students from every class was selected to partake in an audit of the same selection of second grade mentor texts with a modified, student-friendly version of the Scorecard tool. Ms. Descarfino modeled how to use the Scorecard and her

reasoning using a familiar picture book, *A Different Pond* by Bao Phi. Then, students applied these steps to the book sample as they jotted their ideas and findings. Students noticed similar details and shared concerns that were consistent with the Equity Team. After the student library audit, students were invited to join the next Equity Team meeting to share their experience. This empowered the students for their critical thinking and also highlighted the high-level capabilities of elementary level learners to identify inequities and analyze text.

- **Teacher-created cultural units of study, 2022-2023**

Throughout the school year, teacher teams collaborate to build units of study to support each cultural focus and celebration. To kick off the school year, each grade conducts an in-depth country study for Hispanic Heritage Month. In the winter, grades focus on various topics for Black History Month. In the spring, we observe Asian American and Pacific Islander Month with country studies. This structure will allow students to learn about different subtopics during each of their elementary school years. For each of our three celebrations, the staff collaborates in creating an interactive pop-up museum that classes will visit upon completion. Students select projects based on their interests. We also have a school community festival which offers after-school activities, food, and performances to bring together the staff, students, and families of PS 217.

- **Lighthouse Collaborative, Visits in February & May 2023**

In 2022, PS 217 was nominated and selected to be part of the Lighthouse Collaborative to showcase CRSE by hosting a professional day of learning for other NYC educators. After being selected, we had only two weeks to prepare before opening our doors to spotlight our teacher-created units of study playing out in the classroom, pop-up museum, and creative

student projects for Black History Month. Visitors experienced a school fully immersed in black history, from the informational bulletin boards and inspiring classroom doors, the auditorium's sprawling pop-up museum, to most importantly, the conversations students were having and the knowledge they proudly demonstrated.

While the visit was successful and received positive feedback from almost all attendees, we witnessed unprofessional outbursts by two of the visitors. While we understand that we are a work-in-progress, there are respectful and professional ways to voice questions or concerns. These visitors demonstrated disruptive behavior during presentations, including the presentations of children. While disappointing, this experience taught us to better anticipate issues and structure our sessions more intentionally to ensure educators participating in the visit were not put in uncomfortable situations.

During the second visit, we had the opportunity to showcase AAPI Heritage Month. The visit went smoothly for presenters and we received excellent feedback from attendees. These visits were a source of pride for the PS 217 school community and we are glad we had the opportunity to showcase our approach to CRSE.

- **Equity Team Library Audit, Spring 2023**

The Equity Team hosted a second library audit focusing on first and third grade mentor texts along with books to celebrate upcoming Pride month. This allowed returning members to deepen their Scorecard practice, and also served as an opportunity for outreach and involving new teachers or potential members.

- **CRSE Book Study- Staff Professional Learning, Spring 2023**



To further deepen understanding, teacher groups were formed for a professional book study of Zaretta Hammond's *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*. This book study is still in progress. Teachers were surveyed prior to the book study and will be surveyed again to measure growth/change when the book study concludes.

## RESULTS

Over the past few years, PS 217 has embraced CRSE for our diverse student population. We have taken many steps to move in this direction, but the work is not finished. Teacher survey results (shown in the Appendix) display a moderate level of comfort understanding and incorporating CRSE approaches in the classroom. Teachers also report a high level of preparedness to make changes to teaching approaches in order to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. We will continue professional learning through our book study and providing support to teachers.

Unfortunately, there are challenges that come from including and celebrating all communities. During June's Pride celebration, a group of approximately 20 Muslim mothers responded to the school's notification about the start of Pride month and insisted on a meeting to address their concerns. Principal Bonilla addressed this at a PA Meeting and explained that we support our administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community members in the LGBTQ community.

Moving forward, we plan to continue our journey with these goals:

- Expand and diversify the Equity team
- Develop teachers to foster knowledge and confidence in CRSE

- Provide opportunities for parents to share their experiences at school
- Utilize and build upon teacher-created units of study that reflect celebration in PS 217's diverse cultures

#### FELLOW REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

My participation in the Cahn Fellowship program had an impact on both my personal and professional life that I did not anticipate. Through meaningful sessions, I found myself constantly thinking about how I communicate with both people in my professional and personal life. I have always taken pride in my commitment to building meaningful and collaborative relationships. During the adult development sessions, I allowed myself to be vulnerable and uncomfortable at times to gain a deeper understanding of how I communicate and the biases I have difficulty letting go of. Participating in professional development offered through the Cahn Fellowship program has helped me pause and think about the direction my school is taking and the steps I will need to embark on to ensure all voices are heard, seen, and represented. Being provided with space to connect with fellow principals and share leadership experiences has also been beneficial to my professional growth.

I found myself in a constant state of reflection throughout my time with Cahn. Recognizing the success and challenges and ways to improve on both have reinvigorated my drive to take my school to the next level. I have a firm understanding that this “work” is never done. My commitment to the community I serve has always been something I take an immense amount of pride in and through my time with Cahn, I now know exactly what that pride looks and feels like.

The Cahn Fellowship program allowed me to choose an ally and I immediately identified the person I was confident to be the perfect think partner, professional reviewer, and most importantly someone I could collaborate with in a meaningful and intentional manner. I have worked with Danielle for eleven years and have always admired her attention to detail and the love she has for teaching and inspiring students. Danielle's leadership capacities have always been evident in the role of teacher and grade leader. I knew the challenges I would present Danielle with over the course of our time with Cahn would not only be met with excitement but also an attitude to expand on something she already does well, which is to solidify being the change agent many seek out. We faced scheduling, and deadlines, as well as mobilizing challenges together, which I am confident has strengthened our professional and personal relationship. I am also confident that Danielle is someone who needs to be at the table when it comes to the decision-making process in the world of education.

#### ALLY REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

I am grateful for my experience as an Ally with the Cahn Fellowship program this year. It provided me with thought-provoking professional development sessions as well as an opportunity to collaborate with Principal Bonilla and make a difference in our school community. At the start of the program, I was beginning my tenth year as a fifth grade classroom teacher. I have worked with Principal Bonilla since the start of my teaching career. I have always admired him as a leader who is positive, fair, and makes decisions based on the best interest of students.

Although I am a passionate teacher, I constantly want to strive for more in my career. I had set a longtime goal that benchmarked year 10 as my last year in the classroom, working and resume building towards a career shift to curriculum writing or coaching. In 2021, I began a second Master's degree program for an EdM in Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. While these have been busy years, increasing my knowledge in curriculum development and pedagogy, with a focus on culturally relevant teaching fueled the flames of my passion for advancing in this profession.

I have had the opportunity to practice leadership skills over the years as a grade leader. This involves planning and pacing units of study, facilitating grade meetings, event planning, and providing support to my colleagues. Over the last year as many new teachers joined the grade, I intentionally arrived at school when the doors opened each morning and kept my classroom door wide open to make it clear that I was available for support. The Cahn experience has helped me engage in cycles of reflection, increasing my self awareness. I believe a strong leader is a role model, is trustworthy and honors fairness, has the ability to strategize and take meaningful action, listens to others, and genuinely cares.

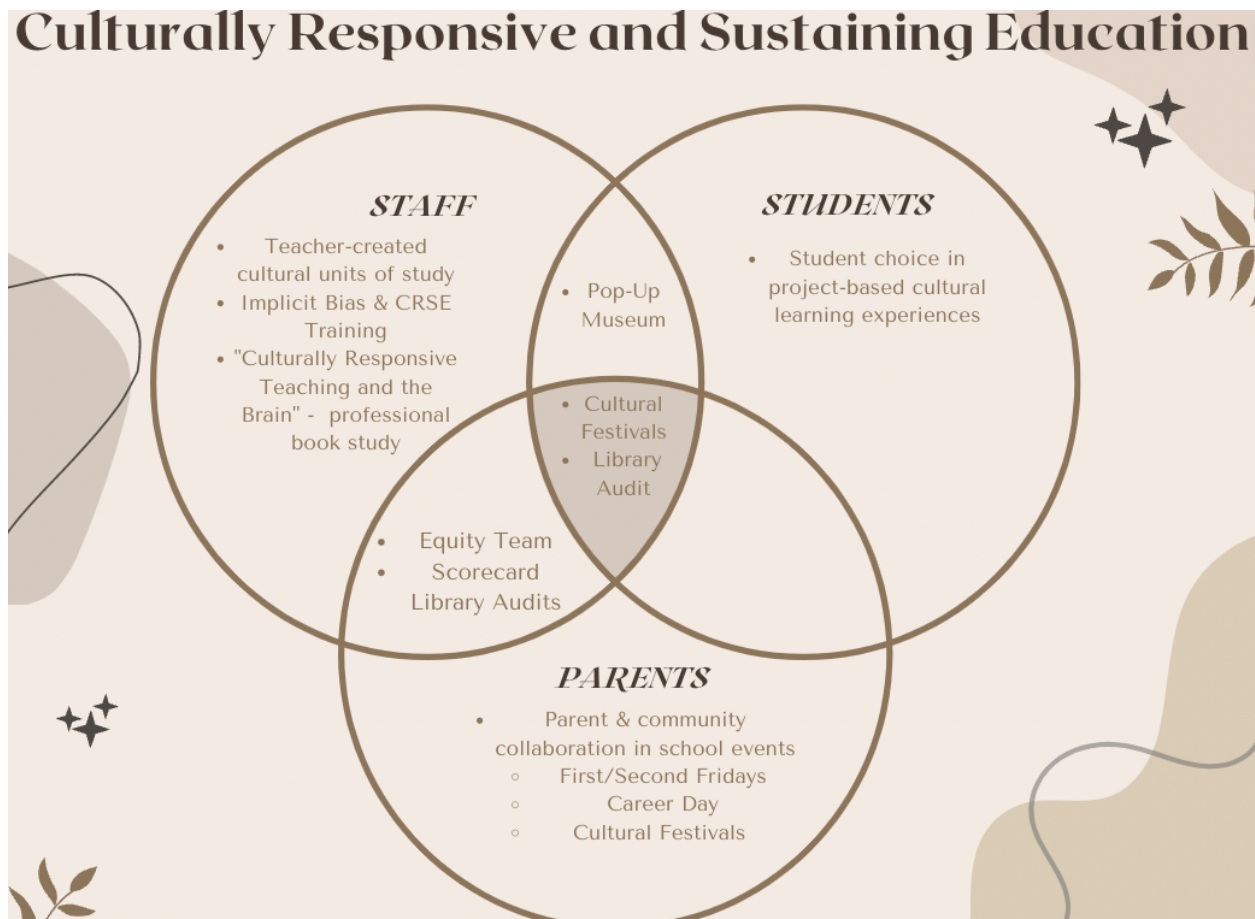
During the Cahn Fellowship sessions, first and foremost, I loved the experience of having time to connect with other school leaders from around the country. Hearing a range of stories and perspectives, yet noticing frequent commonalities, helped to understand bigger pictures in systems of education. I also particularly loved the Adult Development which allowed us to take assessments about our personalities, strengths, collaboration and leadership styles. For example, learning that I was a mix of "green and red" made so much sense, knowing how I tend to bounce between extremes of creativity and structure. It had been so long since I took

time to reflect on myself in these ways. As a classroom teacher, I realized I had gotten used to focusing on others and was neglecting my own needs in a big way. The Cahn Fellowship program has helped me enhance my self care and reevaluate the ways I might apply my strengths and skills to other opportunities. While the past year has been packed with so much hard work and action worthy of celebration, unfortunately I faced a personal struggle as I have failed in my longtime personal goal of advancing my career at this time. However, I feel more prepared and determined than ever to persevere and begin the next phase of my journey. I am excited for what the future holds.

As we culminate our year with the Cahn Fellowship, I am so proud of the work we accomplished. While it has been a complicated journey, we have successfully implemented CRSE in ways that will continue to benefit students and foster connection throughout our very diverse school community. Overall, the Cahn Fellowship has been a wonderful opportunity to participate in thought provoking professional development, collaborate with Principal Bonilla, and engage in meaningful work that will continue to impact PS 217.

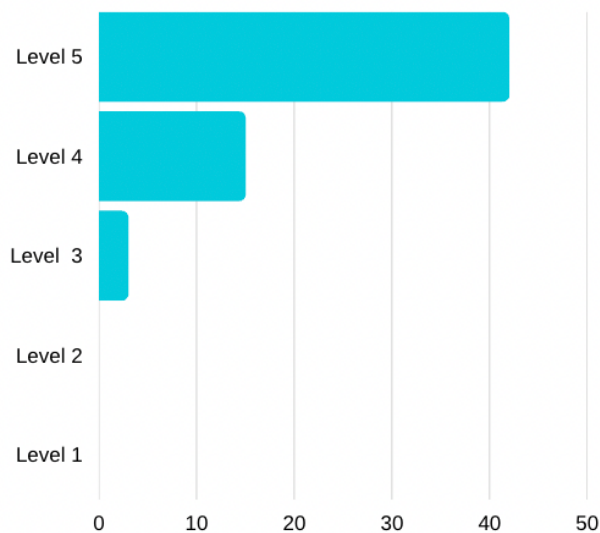
## APPENDIX

## CRSE Staff, Students, and Parent Connection Chart:

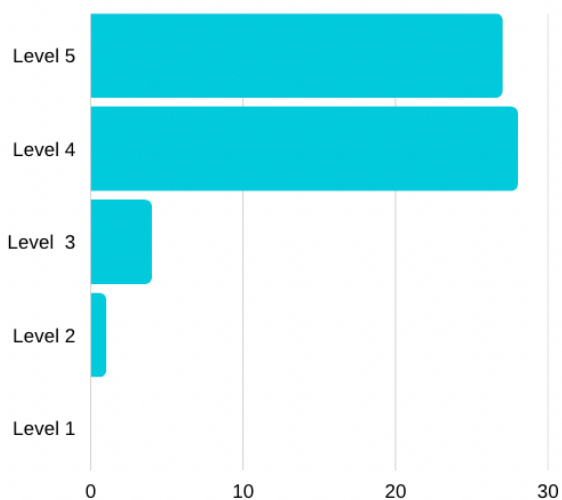


**Teacher Survey Results,** On a scale of 1 to 5, (5 being the most and 1 being the least.) 60 teachers of PS 217 were surveyed in April 2023 after the CRSE modules but before the book study.

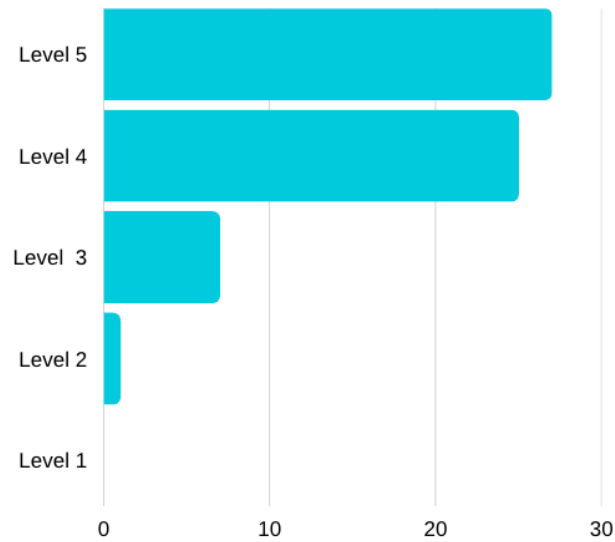
**How comfortable do you feel creating a classroom environment that values and respects everyone regardless of their culture?**



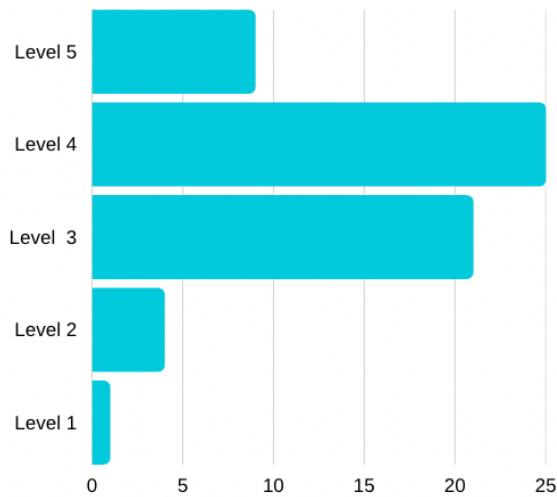
**The image explains the 4 principles that organize NYSED's framework of CR-SE. To what extent do these align with your teaching philosophy?**



How comfortable do you feel including diverse perspectives and experiences into your instruction?

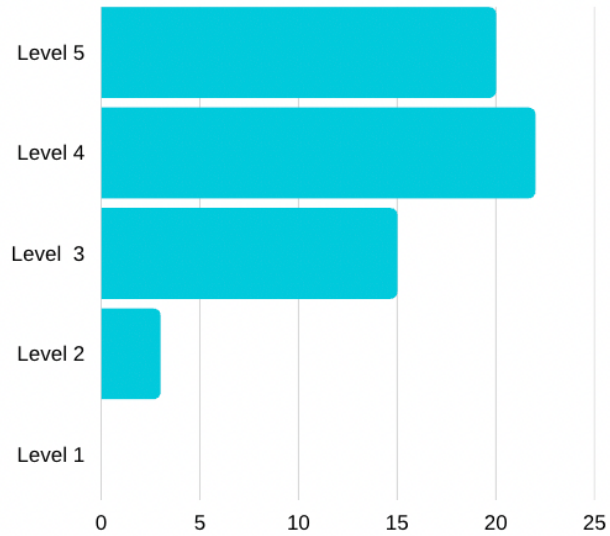


How confident do you feel discussing sensitive cultural topics that may arise in the classroom?





**How comfortable do you feel incorporating multicultural and social justice themes into your curriculum?**



**To what extent do you feel prepared to make changes to your teaching approach to meet the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds?**

