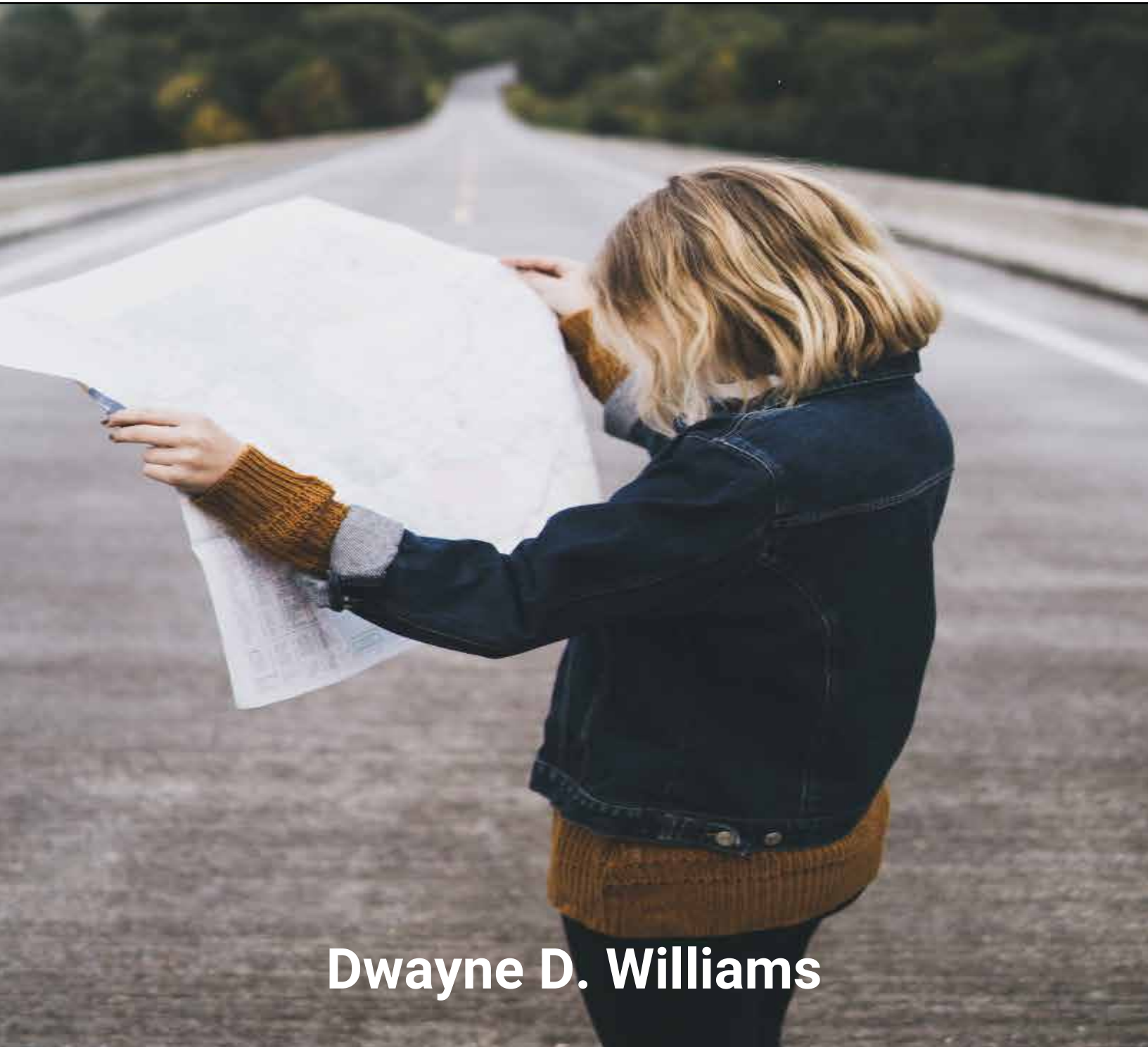


# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Your Roadmap to Designing  
Culturally Sustaining and Antiracist Practices



**Dwayne D. Williams**

# **The Framework is**

## Your Road Map

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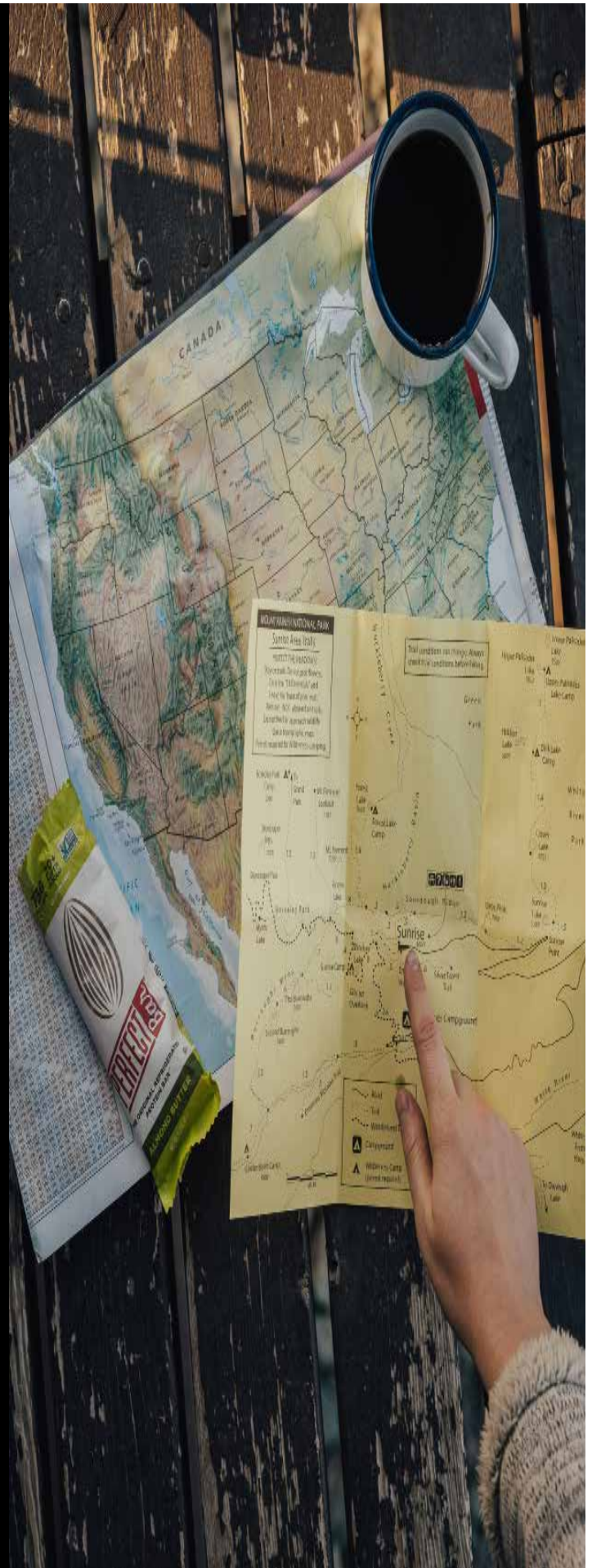
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# Theoretical Frameworks

You have heard the word “theory” and “theoretical framework” a number of times, but what exactly do these terms mean? Why are they important when designing culturally sustaining and antiracist practices?

Theories and theoretical frameworks guide us when designing activities and programming, based on the theory we wish to adopt. In this magazine, I define and describe the purpose of theories and theoretical frameworks when designing culturally sustaining and antiracist practices. I share my experiences coaching teachers through the process of designing culturally sustaining practices, and describe that, one of the most common reasons why they struggled to create equitable programming was because they did not intentionally use a theoretical framework to guide their practices.

## **Objective:**

By the end of this reading, you will recognize the definition and purpose of theoretical frameworks and theories when designing culturally sustaining and equitable practices.

Just for a moment, I want you to imagine . . . imagine you are teaching a lesson on social justice, disrupting the status quo, and creating change. In the middle of your lesson, one of your students of color raises his hand and says, “In your

opinion, why do you think it is so challenging for educators to design activities that place our cultures, literacies, and lived experiences at the center of teaching and learning? Why do you think it is so challenging for teachers to design culturally meaningful activities for us?”

Whoa—what a loaded question.

Well, what’s your answer? Your student is staring you square in your eyes and is demanding a response.

Why do you think it is challenging for educators to design culturally sustaining activities? Just for a moment, jot your response down on a sheet of paper or simply pause and think about how you’d respond to this question.

## **So Many Reasons . . .**

To be sure, there are an array of reasons why teachers struggle to design effective, culturally meaningful activities. If we listed all of the possible reasons why we struggle, we’d need multiple sheets of paper to document our thoughts. In this magazine, I will share my experiences working with teachers and reveal their challenges with designing culturally responsive and sustaining practices. From coaching K-12 teachers on CRT principles over the years, I have observed at least two common reasons why they struggled. While I could have addressed “The top five reasons why teachers may struggle to create culturally sustaining programming”—and actually I will create a video series on this topic—the two reasons that I include in this magazine often makes it impossible to create and sustain culturally meaningful programming. To be sure, the first most common reason usually leads to the second reason, which is why I address them together. I’ll share the first most common reason within the context of a story, which will bring us to the second reason. The story concerns a man who needed a new pair of shoes.

## **Story of the Man Who Needed a New Pair of Shoes**

There was a man who needed a new pair of shoes. This man was very good at math, and he knew that, in order to get shoes that would fit comfortably, it would be necessary to measure his shoe size properly. The man knew how to measure very accurately. He also knew how to draw precise diagrams.

Before he went to the marketplace to purchase his shoes, he drew a very detailed picture of his shoe size on a piece of paper; he carefully measured his feet, and he wrote the exact dimensions of each foot on the diagram. Then, before leaving the house, he checked his figures to ensure that they were accurate, like good mathematicians do.

It was a very long way from the man’s home to the mar-

ketplace where he intended to buy the shoes. It was past midday when the man arrived at the marketplace. When he arrived, he immediately saw the shoe that he wanted. The man rushed to the shoe rack, grabbed the shoe, and lifted it in the air. He was ecstatic!

"Just what I envisioned," the man whispered. As he prepared to ask the cashier for his shoe size, he realized that he had forgotten his diagram that documented the size of his feet. The man quickly put the shoe back on the rack and rushed out of the store. He ran back home, grabbed the diagram off of his dining room table, then ran back to the store.

Because the man lived so far away, the store was closed when he returned. The gate was down. But the man didn't give up. He screamed through the gate:

"Hey, hey, is anyone in there?"

In response, the store manager came to the gate. He was preparing to leave for the night. The manager responded:

"I'm sorry, Sir, we are closed."

"Closed?" the man responded. I was here . . . I, I had my shoe in hand, but I had to leave."

Scratching his head, the store manager asked why the man rushed out of the store.

"I saw you lift a black shoe in the air, then you rushed out of the store. Why did you leave?"

"Well, I forgot my diagram at home," the man said. "I needed my diagram. I sketched it to determine my shoe size. I needed it in order to get the most accurate shoe size."

The store manager laughed hysterically.

"Silly man! Why didn't you just ask me to measure your feet? Better yet, why didn't you just ask to try on a pair of shoes? So you measured and drew a diagram of your feet?" The store manager continued in laughter. "There is a much better approach."

Then the store manager asked,

"Why do you feel that you must measure your feet when purchasing new shoes? That is a very old method."

In response, the man dropped his head in shame and said,

"Because that is what I have always done."

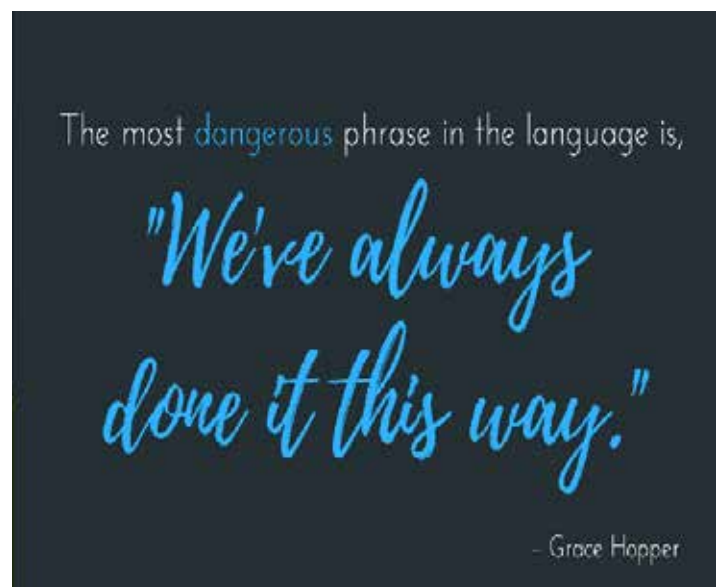
## Reflection:

When was the last time you did something in the classroom, within teams, or when designing lessons, only because it is what you have always done?

- Not because it was effective at boosting engagement.
- Not because it was effective at developing relationships.
- Not because it was effective at disrupting racist policies, programs, and practices.
- Not because it was effective at developing racial identity among students of color.
- But because it is what you have always done it.

## Most Common Reason #1:

Teachers did Things Only Because it was What They Had Always Done.



Based on my experiences coaching teachers, the first most common reason why they struggled to design effective, CRT practices was that they did things only because it was what they had always done. For example, teachers met in problem-solving meetings, department meetings, and small groups, where they discussed the concerns of students and eventually discussed intervention strategies team members believed might boost engagement among students. Essentially, they designed interventions without ever involving their students in the planning process and implemented the interventions in the classroom and in intervention groups. When students did not respond positively to the interventions, team members reconvened to discuss the students' "response to intervention" data and addressed additional intervention strategies; at other times, team members referred students for special education services, based on poor response to intervention. They did this without ever addressing culturally responsive strategies. When I inquired about this process and why certain decisions were made,

team members commented, “Well, that is the way we have always done it.” Others observed, “This has always been our process. It’s how we do it around here”

## **Most Common Reason #2:**

### Teachers did Not Use a Theoretical Framework

The second most common reason educators struggled to design effective culturally sustaining practices was that they did not use theory or theoretical frameworks to guide their practices. Teachers read popular books on CRT, attended in-service trainings on the topic, and met in groups to discuss the content, but failed to apply CRT theories and theoretical frameworks when designing programming for students. In many cases, teachers engaged in “guess work,” attempting to use strategies they had learned from books and in-service training. Although they used terms such as “culturally relevant,” “culturally responsive,” or “culturally sustaining” teaching practices during problem-solving meetings, they rarely allowed those theories to guide their practices.

When I asked, “Which theory or framework guides your practices?” they often stated, “Theory . . . Oh, no . . . we don’t use theory. We work in teams, and we make recommendations based on team decisions.” As I probed further, they eventually stated, “. . . well, this is how we have always done it. This is how we practice.”

As a school-based practitioner, I understand all too well that the term “theory” is taboo in K-12 education. I get it. We want effective interventions, models, and strategies, and some feel that theory does not have its place in the classroom. The reality, however, is that effective interventions, models, and strategies are rooted in theory. Even more, culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and culturally sustaining pedagogies are rooted in theory and supported by research, principles and assumptions associated with theory. Therefore, in order to design effective CRT programming, it is necessary to align practices with the principles of CRT theories. From this view, if we fail to use theories to guide our practices, it is possible to create engaging, culturally meaningful activities, but it will be difficult at best to design culturally sustaining programming.

I will now briefly discuss the importance of theories and theoretical frameworks when designing culturally sustaining practices so that you do not make the common mistake of using terminology associated with CRT theories, yet failing to employ the theories themselves when designing educational programming.

While we will use many tools to redesign our work in ways that are inclusive and equitable, theoretical frameworks are perhaps the most important tools that we will need and use,

and in this magazine, I will explain why.

## **Theoretical Framework:**

According to Imenda (2014), a theoretical framework refers to the theory that researchers choose to guide their research study. Just as theoretical frameworks guide researchers through the research design, frameworks guide practitioners through the process of designing culturally sustaining, inclusive, and antiracist practices. From this view, a theoretical framework is the application of theory (Imenda, 2014). It is the process of applying and using theory as a guide to providing effective instruction, rather than providing instruction based on personal beliefs about what might be effective for students.

Therefore, frameworks guide

- teaching across subjects and across Tiers,
- social emotional learning (SEL) programming,
- trauma-informed supports,
- restorative circle practices,
- school counseling concepts—and all other school-related programming.

## **Theory:**

Theory refers to “a well substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world, based on a body of facts that have been repeatedly confirmed” (Imenda, 2014, p. 188). In the case of CRT, theories explain aspects of teaching culturally diverse learners, based on a body of research that have been repeatedly confirmed.

## **Why Start With a Theoretical Framework?**

Based on what you have processed thus far from this magazine, why must we employ theories when designing culturally responsive or sustaining practices?

The answer is theoretical frameworks are like GPS navigational systems. They are comparable to your Google Map. Your MapQuest. Your Map.Me. Your Wave. Your . . . okay—you get it.

## **Signposts:**

Theoretical frameworks provide guidance; they give directions and provide signposts for educators when designing educational activities. They help practitioners decide which elements of the theory to include when designing lessons. If frameworks could talk, they would say something like

Go here. Try this. Consider that.

Yield to your students . . . integrate their cultural values with instruction.

Provide opportunities for student agency.

Wait . . . wait. Stop!

Wrong way.

Go back. Go back!

Start over . . .

Redesign!



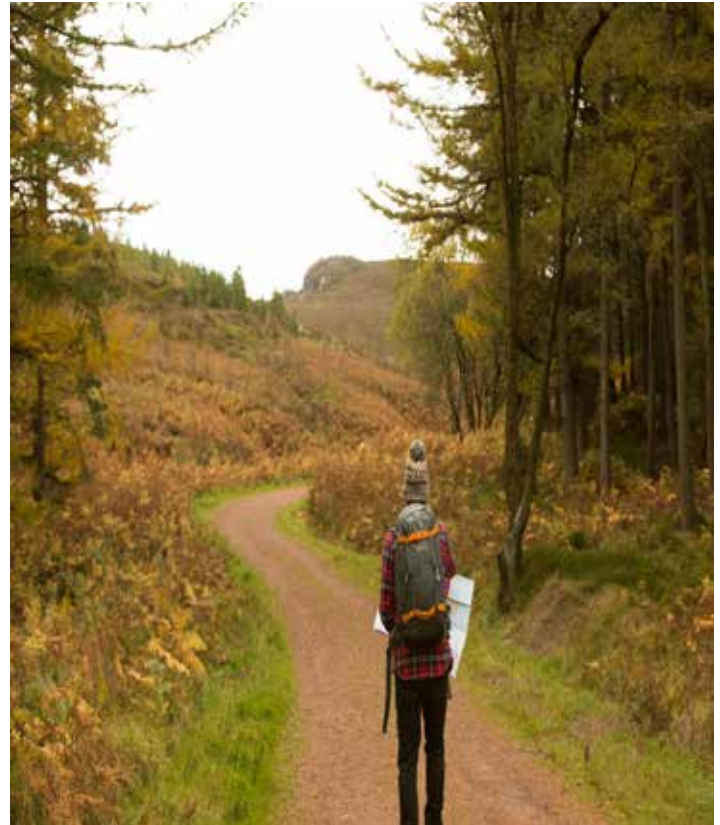
Theoretical frameworks help us think about instruction in particular ways, based on . . . well, yes, you've guessed it—the framework. For example, theories might provoke us to think about the following questions:

- How do my students' cultures inform my lessons?
- In what ways do all students in my classroom, including students of color, benefit from this lesson?
- In what ways do I provide student agency and student voice when designing lessons and when implementing activities?
- How is this activity culturally sustaining?
- How am I challenging racism, discrimination, and injustice explicitly through instruction?
- How am I providing antiracist education?
- How do my lessons sustain the cultures, literacies, languages, heritages, and identities of students of color?

### **The Road Map:**

What might happen if you traveled to an unfamiliar, faraway place without the help of navigational systems, signposts, and meaningful directions? You'd probably get lost, right? I don't think you'd drive hundreds of miles away from your home with the mindset of, "I will just try to figure out where

to go." Meanwhile, you have no directions, no address, no awareness of what routes to take. Without directions, you'd set yourself up for failure. The same applies to theoretical frameworks when designing culturally sustaining, inclusive, and antiracist practices in the classroom. Without frameworks, we set ourselves up for failure. We get lost.



Unfortunately, we often design instruction in the classroom and implement activities without considering theories and frameworks, which is one reason why we fail at designing culturally meaningful programming for culturally diverse learners.

I often hear practitioners talk about culturally responsive, culturally sustaining, and antiracist practices, but I rarely hear them talk about how theory drives their programming. While we should consider how culture and race inform our practices, we must also consider how theories associated with race and culture inform best practices.

### **Questions to Consider:**

- What theoretical frameworks guide my practices?
- Am I aware of the frameworks that guide my practices?
- Are my practices guided by deficit-based thinking?
- What theoretical framework guides the prescriptive, pre-packaged programs that I implement with my students?
- In what ways might prescriptive, prepackaged programs clash with my students' cultural values?
- Do prescriptive, prepackaged programs that I employ in the classroom speak to the lived experiences of all of



my students?

- Are my practices guided by culturally sustaining and antiracist perspectives?

Redesigning educational programming requires that we start thinking about theories and frameworks that inform our teaching practices.

### **The Challenge:**

I challenge your teams to consider culturally sustaining frameworks. Such frameworks focus on sustaining the cultures, literacies, identities, and languages of students when considering SEL development, instruction within MTSS structures, trauma-informed supports, restorative practices, and all other educational programming (Williams, 2020).

### **The Activity—Application:**

If you are a part of an affinity group, problem-solving team, or leadership group, I challenge you to pause and reflect. Instead of moving forward with “culturally responsive,” “culturally sustaining,” or “antiracist” activities, I challenge you and your teams to consider how you are currently applying theories and theoretical frameworks when designing culturally sustaining and antiracist work. This would give your teams the opportunity to determine if your current strategies align with the theories you purport to use.

If you are employing culturally sustaining practices and antiracist programming, dedicate one of your meetings to addressing how theories are guiding your questions, practices, and problem-solving as you engage with the work. Pull out sheets of paper and break into groups; use poster paper and brainstorm together.

Remember, a theoretical framework is the application of theory. Theory refers to a set of explanations. We apply theory by allowing it to inform and guide our practices as practitioners.

Theoretical Framework Source from this Magazine:  
Imenda, S. (2014). Is there a conceptual difference between theoretical and conceptual frameworks? *Journal of Social Sciences*, 38(2), 185-195.

### **Virtual training:**

Contact Dwayne D. Williams if you have questions concerning this magazine or if you’d like to schedule a meeting with Dwayne and your teams to address how theoretical frameworks could help your teams design culturally responsive, sustaining, and antiracist programming.

Email: [dwayne@tier1education.com](mailto:dwayne@tier1education.com)

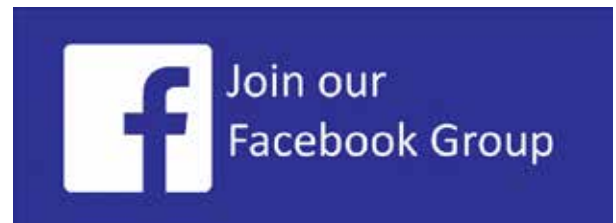
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Ideas from this magazine come from Dwayne D. Williams' (2020) new book:

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