The Student Empowerment through Narrative, Storytelling, Engagement, and Identity Framework for Student and Community Empowerment: A Culturally Affirming Pedagogy

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Abstract: For people from communities experiencing poverty and oppression, education, particularly higher education, is a means to ensure upward socioeconomic mobility. The access to and attainment of education are issues of social and economic justice, built upon foundational experiences in primary and secondary settings, and impacted by students' cultural and socio-political environments. The 2020 murder of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement, ongoing discourse around immigration, and COVID-19-related hate targeting people of Asian American descent prompted national calls to dismantle social and systemic racism, spurring diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives, particularly in education. However, these efforts have faced opposition from teachers who have told students that all lives matter, and racism does not exist in many American classrooms. These comments negate students' experiences, suppress cultural and identity affirmation, and negatively impact student wellness and academic performance. Forged in this polarized environment, two longtime community organizers and educators, an indigenous person living away from her ancestral lands and a multiracial descendant of Japanese Americans interned during WWII, whose identities, experiences, and personal narratives shape the course of their work in and outside of the physical classroom, call on fellow educators to exercise profound love, a deep, ethical commitment to caring for the communities where one works, by adopting a framework to encourage this profound love in students, acting not just as a teacher, but as a sensei. The word sensei is commonly understood in reference to a teacher of Japanese martial arts. The honorific sensei, however, in kanji means one who comes before, implying intergenerational connection. Sensei is an umbrella expression used for elders who have attained a level of mastery within their respective crafts—doctors, teachers, politicians, and spiritual leaders may all earn the title of sensei. The sensei preserves funds of knowledge across generations, passing down and building upon knowledge from those who came before. The Student Empowerment through Narrative, Storytelling, Engagement, and Identity (SENSEI) framework provides an asset-based, culturally affirming approach to working with students in and beyond the classroom. The framework builds on tools and perspectives, including Asset-based Community Development (ABCD), the Narrative Theory, Yosso’s cultural community wealth, cultural continuity, thrivance, community organizing tenets, and storytelling. SENSEI provides a pedagogy that encourages students to explore, define, and own their identities and experiences and grow funds of knowledge, empowering them to transform their own communities from within. The SENSEI framework begins by redefining a teacher as not simply one who teaches in a classroom but rather one who teaches valuable life lessons that transcend colonial conceptualizations of the teacher. In colonized contexts, teachers function to maintain hegemony and assert dominance over marginalized populations. In the SENSEI framework, teachers are those who disrupt colonial patterns and function to reclaim the strengths and voices of the communities they serve. In the SENSEI framework, students are not relegated to those enrolled in classrooms. As with a sensei, a student exists to counter hegemony by embracing and enacting their cultural wealth. Educators must help counter harmful narratives and encourage students to identify the strengths that lie within themselves and their communities. Collective forms of narrative that value identity can ensure the continuity of a community or a people. The stories of students’ histories, traditional
practices, and resilience can help disrupt harms, many that have lasted for generations, so they may not just survive, but thrive.

**Keywords:** pedagogy; higher education; K-12 education; schools; community organizing; culturally affirming; culturally responsive; narrative; identity; storytelling

1. Background

In this practitioner essay, two longtime educators and community organizers tasked with teaching the practice of social justice present a culturally affirming framework utilizing examples and experiences in combined primary to postsecondary educational and community settings. Each introduced framework component includes a corresponding example illustrating how the authors applied the respective component in pedagogy and community practice. The intent of the framework is for all components to hold relevance across multiple settings. The final example provides a concise utilization of all concepts in one environment, specifically for student empowerment. Though the selected examples are listed under a specific component, the examples span across and are interrelated within each framework component. The authors encourage tailoring these components to practitioners’ respective communities.

The Student Empowerment through Narrative, Storytelling, Engagement, and Identity (SENSEI) Framework is presented during a time when students exercising their power across the United States are being threatened, punished, and arrested while calling for social justice in the world around them. Social justice, when defined as the fairness between human relationships, opportunities, and rights, both affects and is affected by education. When access is equitable, and the quality of education is kept at high standards, education provides the knowledge and tools to solve micro and macro socioeconomic problems including crime and violence, and it can help develop innovative ideas to move societies towards justice and peace. Education is critical to improving the quality of life for individuals and entire communities.

However, systems of education have also utilized tools of oppression, assimilation, and harm. Boarding schools throughout the United States funded by congress forcibly separated indigenous children from their families and indigenous schools, stripping them of their culture and language to assimilate. Many children faced abuse, and even death, with graves that First Nations are still discovering today (Tardif 2021; Dawson 2012). Abandoning integrated day schools and boarding schools for indigenous students (which, until the 1870s, were largely the norm), the new system favored segregated schools that limited contact with White students, visits to home, contact with relatives, and anything else that might slow assimilation. Schools were therefore placed as far away from indigenous communities as was feasible. With this history, it is important to recognize that for many communities, schools are not seen as safe spaces. This sentiment is especially timely today in light of the current social and political sentiments college and university students are showing in higher education institutions throughout the United States.

During the first weeks of May 2024, thousands of university students across the United States were arrested while protesting the treatment and killing of Palestinians in Gaza. The charges ranged from unlawful assembly to trespassing, leading to greater debates around First Amendment rights to the use of law enforcement by institutions to address student safety. These institutional responses to student protests resulted in faculty and community calls for chancellor resignations to reports of unfair labor practices being filed by university staff who joined students during protests (Robbins et al. 2024; Times of San Diego 2024). As one faculty member at the University of San Diego, pointed out, “Clearly what is happening in Gaza right now with U.S. support is one of the world’s most pressing issues. Students are drawing attention to this, and dominant power structures are responding by sending in the police to attack them and drag some of them off to jail, when they are really doing
what we’ve asked them to do as educators (Temp et al. 2024)”. Recalling the tragic history at Kent State University in Ohio on 4 May 1970, when National Guard troops fired into a crowd of students protesting the Vietnam War, killing four and injuring eight others, the conversation of student empowerment is timely and necessary.

2. Student Empowerment

For people from communities experiencing poverty and oppression, education, particularly higher education, is a means to ensure upward socioeconomic mobility. Access to and the attainment of education are issues of social and economic justice, built upon foundational experiences in primary and secondary settings and impacted by students’ cultural and socio-political environments (Hughes et al. 2016). Rogers (2017) found that teachers observed increased bullying after the 2016 election, particularly around White supremacist, homophobic, Islamophobic, xenophobic, and misogynistic messaging in predominantly White schools. When educational systems and educators suppress cultural and identity affirmation in students, this negatively impacts student wellness and academic performance. Stereotypes like the model minority myth, when internalized by students, can lead to adverse educational outcomes such as academic self-efficacy and academic achievement, as well as adverse mental and physical effects (Walton and Truong 2023).

In her article on community cultural wealth (CCW), Yosso (2005) and Olco ´ n and Sund (2018) point out the need to allow students to draw from their firsthand knowledge of their communities and cultures and to utilize this knowledge in their academic experiences. By doing so, students, particularly students of color, may better meet their educational goals. Education can serve as a base for students’ own liberation and consciousness building by providing an insight into their own experiences and a vision for changing the conditions of their communities (Boyd and Smith 2016; Freire 2017). Consistent with community cultural wealth, asset-based approaches like Williams et al.’s (2021) culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) adds to culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings 2007), utilized as a pedagogical tool within K-12 education. CRP and CSP recognize that students from racially marginalized groups have and bring cultural resources to benefit them in their education, blending celebrations of their own cultures and learning tools to address real-world issues (Ladson-Billings 2007).

3. The SENSEI Framework

The Student Empowerment through Narrative, Storytelling, Engagement, and Identity (SENSEI) framework provides an asset-based, culturally affirming approach to working with students in and beyond the classroom. The framework builds on tools and perspectives, including Asset-based Community Development (ABCD), the Narrative Theory, Yosso’s cultural community wealth, cultural continuity, thrivance, community organizing tenets, and storytelling (Yosso 2005). SENSEI provides a pedagogy that encourages students to explore, define, and own their identities and experiences and grow funds of knowledge, empowering them to transform their own communities from within. As community organizers, the authors redefine the classroom as any learning space, like public libraries providing critical safe spaces for people experiencing homelessness or children after school, neighborhood markets where people gather, or the living rooms of those neighborhood “aunties” everyone seems to know. “Students” are not relegated to those enrolled in classrooms and can extend to community members being educated to mobilize for various causes.

The SENSEI framework begins by redefining a teacher as not simply one who teaches in a classroom but rather one who teaches valuable life lessons that transcend colonial conceptualizations of the teacher. In colonized contexts, teachers function to maintain hegemony and assert dominance over marginalized populations. In schools with rigid hierarchical structures, preserving adult power is more common than engaging students as learning partners (Mitra 2003). In the SENSEI framework, educators are asked to disrupt colonial patterns and function to reclaim the strengths and voices of the communities.
they serve. In essence, they are asked to act as an allies and accomplice co-laboring with students in a mutual learning experience. As with a sensei, a student exists to counter hegemony by embracing and enacting their cultural wealth (Yosso 2005). Educators must help counter harmful narratives and encourage students to identify the strengths that lie within themselves and their communities. Collective forms of narrative that value identity can ensure the continuity of a community or a people (King 2003). The stories of students’ histories, traditional practices, and resilience can help disrupt harms, many that have lasted for generations, so they may not just survive, but thrive (Baumann 2023). Educators can facilitate student narratives, storytelling, and identity with tools like positive feedback to recognize and highlight students’ strengths in their work and performance. Specific and meaningful feedback not only allows students to improve their academic performance, but it can also aid in strengthening their confidence and self-esteem (Câmpean et al. 2024). Figure 1 is a visual representation of the SENSEI framework with its interrelated components.

![Figure 1. The four interrelated components of the SENSEI framework.](image)

4. Component: Narratives

4.1. Framing and Historical Context

Critical theorists argue that the K-12 system of schooling in the United States exists for the purpose of maintaining hegemony. Schooling functions to promulgate narratives rooted in racial hierarchy. Measures of student intelligence and achievement were designed by eugenicists with the intent of perpetuating the narrative that White Europeans are superior in intellect and aptitude compared to all other races. Though the K-12 system of schooling has now divorced itself from the names of the eugenicists who created these measurement tools, the biased practices behind them remain to be presented. Narratives regarding marginalized communities continue to embody deficit ideologies rooted in racial bias (Jové et al. 2015). These narratives undergird the continued inequities in school funding and discriminatory practices that target BIPOC students, immigrants, and other marginalized communities.

The first component of the SENSEI framework is narrative. Narratives capture ideologies and perspectives that are contained within stories. A story can be defined as a sequence of events, while a narrative is a paradigm that serves to interpret and provide meaning behind a story (Kirby 1991). The story of the system of K-12 schooling in the US, for example, includes all of the events related to schools—the first public school established, boarding schools for indigenous peoples, significant court cases such as Brown vs.
the Board of Education, federal and state policies such as No Child Left Behind, and the Every Student Succeeds Act. The story itself does not necessarily imply values and beliefs. Narrative provides an interpretation of the story. Critical theorists use the term dominant narrative to describe the meaning that dominant power structures ascribe to reality—as Delgado states, “the prevailing mindset by means of which of the dominant group justify the world as it is, with whites on top and browns and blacks at the bottom” (Delgado 1989, p. 2413). The SENSEI framework begins with narrative as a recognition that the narratives of the dominant group exist to maintain societal inequities. These inequities disempower marginalized students. To reclaim power, dominant narratives must be disrupted.

4.2. Counternarratives: Disrupting Dominant Narratives

Counternarratives function as resistance to dominant ideologies (MacLaren 1995). Counternarratives lay the groundwork for students from marginalized communities to redefine their many and varied cultural practices and ways of being as assets (Lopez 2003; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Dominant narratives affix deficit-oriented labels upon marginalized communities that hide the many and varied funds of knowledge that the students possess (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). When teachers do not actively resist dominant narratives, they operate as purveyors and perpetuators of deficits that disempower students. Dominant narratives flatten and simplify the complexities and nuances of marginalized groups and reduce them to stereotypes and tropes. They dehumanize and reduce people to labels. Counternarratives lay the pedagogical framework for students and teachers alike to rehumanize relationships.

4.3. Counternarratives in School Leadership: Juvenile Court and Community Schools

One of the authors of this article served as a principal for the juvenile court and community schools with a county office of education in California. His past experiences with law enforcement as a youth combined with his father’s incarceration inspired him to work with justice-involved youth. The students that he served were expelled from their school districts for various education code violations. According to the California Education Code, when a student is expelled, they must be removed from a regular school environment for the remainder of the semester that the incident occurred and one additional full semester. Once a student is expelled from their local school district, they are then referred to juvenile court and community schools operated by a county office of education. The local school district collaborates with the county office of education to determine student placement at a community school, often based on purported gang affiliation. For example, within one city, there may be three to four separate community schools in different areas based on gang territory boundaries. The dominant narrative that both the school districts and the county office of education held in regard to the students was that they were criminals, gang members, and/or victims of the gang lifestyle. These dominant narratives justified policies that the students needed to be separated to be educated. These gang sites were located in strip malls next door to liquor stores and laundromats. In this environment, two to three teachers taught self-contained classrooms of approximately 25 students for the entire school day. The students did not change classes, were not taught by content area specialists, did not take elective courses, and were not given the opportunity to participate in physical education nor any other co- or extra-curricular courses of study. The quality of the education was seriously diminished as one teacher was often responsible for teaching every subject within a single classroom of students ranging from 13 to 18 years old. As a result, the students disengaged from their learning. In theory, students were able to return to their school districts after approximately a year of expulsion. In these subpar learning environments, student motivation was low, and attendance diminished greatly. Thus, in practice, students seldom returned to their regular schools and remained in the juvenile court and community schools indefinitely, with many of them dropping out of school altogether.
While the author served as a principal for the juvenile court and community schools, he sought to disrupt the dominant narrative through eliminating gang sites and bringing students together into a single larger school campus. This larger school campus offered elective courses of interest to the students, including robotics and horticulture. Students participated in physical education activities including basketball, soccer, and skateboarding contracted through a local nonprofit organization. Figure 2 shows the campus described.

Figure 2. A photograph of the larger school campus that would eventually combine previous gang sites in one location. After the campus was established, the empty space next to the grass slope became an outdoor student-led garden as part of a horticulture elective course. In the back of the campus where the empty wall is faintly depicted is where the student mural would be established. The photograph is from the authors’ personal collection.

Though there was initial resistance to bringing the students from local governing officials and the school system together onto a single campus, the principal relied upon coalition building efforts and collaboration across nonprofit organizations and governmental agencies to allay concerns. Once the campus was established and students were all together on the same school site, it was critical to further problematize the dominant narratives that the divisions between student groups were insurmountable and required them to be segregated from one another and the society at large. To invite dialogue and reflection, the students and staff were posed with the following essential question: “Are the bonds that divide us as strong as those that unite us?”

4.3.1. A Dialogic Model to Co-Construct Counternarratives

This posed question is at the center of the dialogic model of education first conceived by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2017). The dialogic approach is an invitation to interrogate dominant narratives and challenge existing schemas about where knowledge resides, who has the potential to learn, and to what degree (Lewis 2012). Dialogue invites those who have been harmed by dominant narratives to be freed from the belief systems that have served to maintain their oppression (Freire 2017, p. 88).

One of the visible ways that this essential question was explored was through a mural that the students co-constructed across the campus. According to Freire, “education is politics, art, and knowing” (Lewis 2012). The mural invited all members of the school community to explore the cultures and identities of the students and communities. A total of 98% of the students identified as Latinx, Chicanx, or Mexican American. A partnership was established between the MEChA student organization at a local university wherein the college students engaged with the high school students in conversations related to Chicano
history, art, and culture. To build further context, students visited Chicano Park in San Diego and observed the murals and writings and spoke with community leaders.

4.3.2. Counternarratives: Culture, Family, and Healing

This exploration revealed sources of knowledge that the students had not previously been exposed to—these knowledge forms were crucial to developing counternarratives. As Solórzano and Yosso explain, “to create counter-stories, we begin by finding and unearthing sources of data” (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, p. 33). Over a six-month period, the dialogue yielded these shared understandings related to the essential question: (1) deep culture: students and staff discovered cultural connections between and among students traced to their indigenous roots by utilizing positive feedback and framing culture and heritage as strengths, (2) family partnerships: parents, namely mothers, served as mentors and sources of connection between students, and (3) art as therapy and healing: the mural and other art forms that students engaged in served as catalysts for therapy and healing within and between student groups. Figure 3 shows the students working on the mural. Each of these three understandings disrupted dominant narratives and served as counternarratives and sources of liberation for the students and the community. The school continues to exist and thrive largely as a result of disrupting dominant narratives and creating dialogue to invite counternarratives.

Figure 3. Students begin collectively painting a mural on the school campus. Here, a campus mentor is dialoguing with students to increase the empathy lenses of others whose lived experiences differ from their own. The photograph is from the authors’ personal collection.

5. Component: Storytelling

5.1. Storytelling and Dominant Narratives

Storytelling purveys ideologies contained within narratives. Those in power often use storytelling to justify oppression. Dominant narratives encapsulate hegemonic ideologies. The dominant narratives of meritocracy and Manifest Destiny have been used throughout America’s history to justify genocide, enslavement, colonization, and land theft. Delgado states, “the dominant group justifies its privileged position by means of stories, stock explanations that construct reality in ways favorable to it (Delgado 1989, p. 2438)”. Furthermore, dominant narratives may be internalized by marginalized groups to maintain subjugation. Thus, a critical step for oppressed peoples to become liberated is to embrace counternarratives that embody the many and varied assets that hegemonic forces have attempted to strip away from them.
5.2. Storytelling and Counternarratives

Storytelling presents itself as a vehicle by which counternarratives can function as sources of student empowerment. Storytelling builds and preserves community among marginalized groups. Storytelling also challenges “received wisdom” and opens “new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live” (Delgado 1989, p. 2414). As the stories of counternarratives are told, it creates space to dismantle oppressive practices and to replace them with liberatory ways of being.

Storytelling: Counternarratives as Safeguards against Hegemony

In addition to the counternarratives that the students began to develop and co-construct through their interrogation of the essential question (“Are the bonds that divide us as strong as those that unite us?”), it was critical that these counternarratives were told and shared broadly. Storytelling can function to ensure counternarratives are not overtaken nor diminished by prevailing dominant narratives. In school settings, when counter-narratives emerge, they can be quickly overshadowed and overrun.

Social systems exist to ensure the continuance of hegemony. Thus, school systems tend to return to their natural state of equilibrium, which is hegemonic and oppressive. The resegregation of schools across the US is one of many examples of the ways in which social systems revert to inequitable structures and practices. The Civil Rights Project found that schools across the nation have continued to become more segregated in the past three decades (Frankenberg et al. 2019). Thus, in the past several years, civil rights activists and organizations have begun retelling the stories of desegregation beginning with individual students who paved the way for school desegregation in the most challenging of circumstances. As with many civil rights efforts, the youths have been instrumental in leading them. In 2018, fifth-grade students in the South San Francisco Unified School District began advocating to make November 14th Ruby Bridges Day In 2021, the California State Senate passed Resolution 59 to make the day official (Becker 2021, SR 59).

5.3. Component Application Example: “If You Don’t Tell Your Story Who Will?” The Ribbon Cutting Ceremony

In the author’s experiences described previously, it was critical to capture the stories from the students to memorialize their efforts. Storytelling preserves culture, promotes group solidarity, and “emboldens the hearer” (Delgado 1989, p. 2437). The author was concerned that after his tenure, the school campus would be eventually disbanded and that there would be a return to gang sites as the norm. The students were more than criminals and victims. The students were able to overcome divisions of street gangs. The students could coexist and exceed expectations. If they were brought together, it would not “become a blood bath”, as one county supervisor warned the author prior to the opening of the school campus. It has since been eleven years since the school was established. The campus remains today. Blood baths did not ensue, and the students continue to coexist despite gang affiliations. The author enacted a critical move to tell the stories of these counternarratives as a means to permanently enshrine them into the collective psyche of the county office of education. The school held a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

The author’s mentor often poses this rhetorical question as it relates to counternarratives: “If you don’t tell your story, who will?” This question prompted the author to plan a ribbon-cutting ceremony as the official opening of the school campus to the larger public. The ceremony gave the pretext to invite dignitaries, the media, community partners, families, and school officials to hear the students tell their stories. There were several important moves that took place to ensure that these stories were captured and known across the county.

5.3.1. Dignitary Recognition and Attendance

In any area, the county superintendent of schools holds an important position of power. This is often a political position that is won by election. Thus, the superintendent was an
important figure to be present at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. To incentivize his attendance, an award was created for him, and he was tasked with completing the final stroke of the mural. Once his attendance was confirmed, securing the attendance of other dignitaries was simple—they were told that the county superintendent would be in attendance.

5.3.2. Community Partner Recognition and Attendance

It was also important that other community partners attend, as shown in Figure 4. The school relied upon community partnerships to provide wrap-around services. Memorializing their role in the creation and success of the school promoted long-term partnerships. The local university, community college, community clinic, ACLU chapter, community mental health services, and other community-rooted individuals were personally invited and given a plaque to recognize their role in supporting the school.

![Figure 4. Dignitaries receiving recognition at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. This formal storytelling moment captured the counternarratives and engrained them into the collective knowledge of the region. The photographs is from the authors' personal collection.](image)

5.3.3. Media Involvement

The principal reached out to the local news media, the county office of education chief communications officer, and television media to attend. The local print media published an article on the event, and the local Univision television station featured the event during the nightly 6 o’clock news. These stories have been captured and framed in the school office so that they might be remembered and preserved. These interactions are shown in Figures 5 and 6.

5.3.4. Family Engagement

Expelled students have families whom they love and who love them as well. It was important for the students’ families to be present, celebrated, and recognized. To ensure attendance, the author personally invited families and asked them to bring food for a potluck lunch. The potluck supported a community atmosphere and further strengthened connections among and between families and their students. In Figure 7, several parents are shown partaking in the food they brought from their respective cultures, sharing with the school’s staff as well. This was significant in that many of the parents had never been invited to the school, unless for disciplinary actions. Bringing families and caregivers on site to share in their childrens’ accomplishments helped build a sense of shared togetherness and belonging.
The photographs are from the authors' personal collection.

**Figure 5.** Local print and televised news media capturing stories from the principal, students, and families. The photograph is from the authors’ personal collection.

**Figure 6.** Local print and televised news media capturing stories from the principal, students, and families. The photographs is from the authors’ personal collection.

**Figure 7.** School staff serving food to families at potluck lunch during the ribbon-cutting ceremony. The photograph is from the authors’ personal collection.
5.3.5. Student Voices

The final critical component of the ribbon-cutting ceremony were the students’ stories. Six students gave speeches and told the story of the school, their experiences with schooling, and the ways in which this campus empowered them to become their best selves, shown in Figure 8. This was the first speech given by this student, who shared how the impact of having staff and community partnerships helped positively impact his academic experience. The ribbon-cutting ceremony served as an illustration of the success of community collaboration, drawing together all the familial and community systems around the school and ultimately the students, so that these resources may come together to forge a learning environment where students felt they belonged, where their parents could learn to play an active role in their success, and where teachers became partners in these students journeys.

![Image of a student giving a speech during the ribbon-cutting ceremony.](image)

**Figure 8.** A student giving a speech during the ribbon-cutting ceremony describing the systemic barriers he faced as a student in the K-12 system of schooling, the challenges he overcame, and ways in which this school campus offered an empowering and different experience. The photograph is from the authors’ personal collection.

Comments: The success of coalition building/coalition building was embodied in the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

6. Component: Engagement

As educators, engagement with students must teach students how to recognize their own assets and grow their confidence so they believe they may positively impact the world around them. Effective dyadic teacher–student relationships influence students’ engagement and achievement (Roorda et al. 2017). Education that empowers results in students learning and utilizing the tools they have learned. Regardless of the scenario (i.e., parent–child, spouse–spouse, physician–patient, manager–employee relations, etc.), the empowerment of others is a critical key to the fostering of productive and meaningful engagement (Benzel 2022). The student empowerment theory suggests that students, especially adolescents, are more likely to report feeling they more have agency when the school professionals engaging with them are seen as collaborators rather than authoritarians (Nisle and Anyon 2023; Perkins and Zimmerman 1995).

Engaging pedagogy includes assessments and assignments that center on student experiences and allow them to critically apply learned content. For example, the authors are both professors teaching human services and social work in a community college setting to a racially, socioeconomically, gender-identifying, and age-diverse student population in Southern California in the United States. With an alarming disparity in community need for culturally sensitive social workers, it is critical to recruit and engage students willing to commit to the years necessary to become an educated and trained social worker. The authors incorporate Freire’s (2017) principles of liberatory praxis, grounded in action and reflection, achieved through dialogue and a critical reading of the world, which encourages
learners and educators to approach each other, question each other, and agree and disagree with each other and can promote experiential, meaningful, and personally relevant learning (DeWaard and Roberts 2021).

6.1. Component Application Example: Class Agreement

The following principles are written as class agreements between the author as an instructor and the students:

1. We are in a mutual learning partnership with each other as student and professor, and amongst one another between students.
2. I, as the instructor, know the profession well enough, but as humans and the world change, so does social work, and our role in society. Therefore, I may not always have the “right” answers, but I am committed to learning alongside you as students.
3. You are experts on your lives (this is a social work perspective as well) and your communities, and those experiences are strengths you can and will utilize in your personal lives and careers.

6.2. Component Application Example: Advocacy Letter

One social work course introduces students to the various settings and communities that people with social work training tend to work in, including mental health, gerontology, the justice system, policy, and service settings working with populations experiencing a wide range of challenges from racism to poverty. As a final assignment, students are asked to write an advocacy letter about a cause or issue they observe in their communities, along with a solution or idea, to a public official or decision maker. The goals of the assignment are to 1. encourage critical thinking, analyze environments and systems, and determine how these things affect them and the communities they care about, 2. challenge students’ notions of saviorism and instill the perspective of seeing people they will work with as partners and equal human beings beyond “clients” or “consumers”, 3. utilize lived experiences and observations of their own communities while 4. integrating concepts learned in class, literary reviews, and interviews with community members and content experts to formulate solutions, and 5. learn who the decision makers are that they may approach to work collaboratively with for solutions. Students may choose a challenge, issue, or problem in their own communities to center their advocacy letter on. Students often report enjoying the assignment, as challenging as it is, as it relates to their own concerns and passions and validates their experiences. More importantly, they learn that they still have a voice and a say in issues whether or not they have earned their degrees. Examples of student ideas included translation services in county health and human service agencies and assembly bills addressing the use of “deadly force” by law enforcement after family interviews and reports showed that Black and brown detainees were experiencing “deadly force” at higher rates than others. Figure 9 shows one of these classes, whose advocacy letters revealed their understanding of issues and opportunities in their communities.

Figure 9. One co-author and one of the community college social work classes who produced advocacy letters in 2020. The photograph is from the authors’ personal collection.
6.3. Component Application Example: Resident Testimony

Beyond the classroom, the authors have worked as and alongside community organizers, advocating for themselves and their neighborhoods. Through learning narratives around their identities and experiences, residents tell their own stories. One effort involved residents living in a city district’s only low-income rental property that was being demolished and replaced with newer housing, with no guarantees for the majority of people of color, elders, veterans, and retired residents living in the apartment complex. It was critical to work alongside these residents to help them articulate their stories and situations for testimonies to the city’s housing commission and city council so they may advocate for their living situations. One resident, an 84-year-old Filipina grandmother who served as a caregiver for many of the community’s children through the years, appreciated living in a one-story, ground-level apartment. By working alongside her to tell her story and understand the role these public bodies played, she was empowered to give testimony at several public hearings. That grandmother is shown in Figure 10, along with two other elders from the same apartment complex.

![Elder residents of a lower-income rental community speaking at their City Hall, organized with several volunteer community organizers, including a co-author, in 2017. The photograph is from the authors’ personal collection.](image)

Figure 10. Elder residents of a lower-income rental community speaking at their City Hall, organized with several volunteer community organizers, including a co-author, in 2017. The photograph is from the authors’ personal collection.

7. Component: Identity

For students from racially marginalized, colonized, and under-resourced communities, forging a positive sense of identity is critical to achieve overall wellness as well as academic success. During adolescence, many youths experience a developmental need for agency and autonomy, which can be incongruous when in a non-supportive school environment (Nisle and Anyon 2023). Cultural disconnection and a lack of cultural continuity create a loss of confidence at the individual level in understanding how to live life and make decisions (Morris 2007; Krieg 2016). By encouraging students to explore, articulate, and own their identities, educators may further empower students.

A qualitative study by Williams et al. (2021) analyzed the strategies utilized by historically Black colleges and university (HBCU’s) faculty and staff to center Blackness via culturally engaging environments and practices to affirm Black students’ racial identities. A recommendation from the study was to make deliberate connections to different aspects of students’ cultures so that they do not feel the need to divorce themselves from aspects of their identities while they pursue their higher education. An earlier study of Black and
Latino students in STEM disciplines (McGee 2016) warned against the dangers of devaluing students’ racial and cultural identities. The study found that Black and Latino/a/s students who attended institutions of higher education, including minority-serving schools (those who received federal designation and funding to support their significant number of lower-income students of color), and majored in STEM experienced structural barriers, discrimination, and racism that damaged their racial identities, causing “lasting psychological strain”.

The knowledge of traditions, languages, and cultures of peoples and the ability to pass this cultural heritage to future generations is known as cultural continuity, often related to cultural identity (Brown 2000). Cultural continuity has been linked to self-identity, self-confidence, and to determinants of health, especially for people who experienced significant traumas over cultural and physical genocide (Auger 2016; Chandler et al. 2003a, 2003b). Cultural identity has a major influence on confidence and self-esteem. The concept of thrivance can be integrated into moving away from deficit-based narratives. Instead, thrivance encourages identifying and utilizing traditional ways of knowing to emphasize collective knowledge systems and responsibilities to one another amongst and within generations (Walters et al. 2020). Thrivance focuses on the importance of healing to a positive self-identity (Baumann 2023). Combined with practices emphasizing community cultural wealth, thrivance, and cultural continuity, students may reset narratives for themselves and the world around them, forging an empowered sense of identity.

Another concept useful to forging strength-based identities is community cultural wealth (CCW), which is defined as an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and used by communities of color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression (Yosso 2005). CCW specifically counters deficit perspectives and identifies six forms of cultural wealth—asperational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital—that marginalized groups possess and should be able to utilize when re/building communities. A case study reviewed an Illinois-based university where Latinx/a/o social work students experienced conflicts between their developing professional identities and their current cultural identities. CCW was introduced to explore how Latinx/a/o students could build their various forms of capital. To support aspirational capital, for example, the college offered childcare and flexible class schedules to accommodate working and parenting students. Since the program was implemented, retention and graduation rates have risen, and the program received national accolades (Olco´n and Sund 2018).

Utilizing CCW’s six forms of capital counters deficit perspectives that further stigmatize communities (Fernández et al. 2020). The first form of capital is aspirational capital, the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. Educators may foster this by having students dream and imagine goals and careers, including early exposure programs at the middle to high school level, to mentoring and internship programs in higher education. Linguistic capital describes intellectual and social skills through communicating in multiple languages and the expression of culture. Language immersion programs in K-12 schools or allowing students to count native languages in university graduation requirements can honor students’ linguistic abilities (Oster et al. 2014). Social capital describes the social support students may have and can utilize to strengthen their communities’ collective power. Schools and colleges can support cohort models with intensive interactions amongst students, instructors, and tutors, which have shown to be very effective in community college settings where many first-generation students of color attend (Miller and Weiss 2022).

7.1. Component Application Example: PEER

Navigational capital allows students to navigate multiple institutions (Yosso 2005). One example of encouraging navigational and social capital is the San Diego City College’s Program for Engaged Educational Resources (PEER), which is funded by the San Diego Housing Commission. The PEER program includes what is known to be the first higher education course on homelessness, developed alongside experts in homelessness prevention, social services, and policy, as well as academic counseling, career counseling,
job seeking and job application assistance, coaching for resume building and interviewing skills, and partnerships with more than 30 organizations who hire students—many still working on their associate’s degrees in social work, alcohol and drug studies, gerontology, or psychology—to work in homelessness prevention. The program was formed by utilizing an understanding of systems theory and the need to integrate multiple departments, partners, and staff for a clear classroom-to-career path for students (Michailakis and Schirmer 2014). In Figure 11, a co-author is with three of the program’s alumni, who have experienced housing insecurity and other barriers as well. Because of the program’s wrap-around type of approach with education, career support, and external partnerships, these alum work in organizations that address homelessness. One alumni reported being able to secure their own apartment for the first time in many years. In Figure 12, another PEER alum shared their experiences with others during a housing conference in Southern California, in a county with one of the largest housing-insecure populations in the United States. By having students owning and sharing their lived experiences, they are able to utilize these parts of their identity to help further their educational and career goals. As Figure 12 shows, not only do students gain careers, they grow their capacity to be thought leaders and experts in the issues they feel are important.

Familial capital speaks to the assets of culture, history, and mutual support learned through family (Yosso 2005). This can be emphasized with students by through the use of identity-affirming exercises, encouraging them to recognize and learn about the histories of their families and communities while exploring cultural practices that may or may not differ from those around them (Walters et al. 2020). To note, the authors recognize that not all individuals are raised with their biological families, and so it is critical to allow students to define culture as the norms, morals, beliefs, and practices in the households they were raised, and hopefully identify those practices they felt strengthened their agency while gaining a sense of belonging.
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7.2. Component Application Example: Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Forum

One of the authors organized, alongside other educators, licensed clinical behavioral health practitioners, librarians, several nonprofits, and motorcycle clubs, an open community-based forum (Figures 13 and 14) for understanding mental health and encouraging help-seeking behavior to build upon familial and cultural capital and challenge dominant narratives of speaking about personal struggle as weakness. Licensed clinicians served as a resource should crises arise, while service providers and liaisons provided referrals for long-term needs, as college professors facilitated discussions. Community members donated “merienda”, snacks from various Southeast Asian restaurants and bakeries, to foster a communal, casual gathering where people would feel safe sharing their stories and narratives to reframe and redefine some of the harmful practices they may have experienced growing up. Figure 13 shows one of the group breakouts where attendees shared stories based on their identities as Asian-Americans. Much of what was shared included experiences with discrimination during the height of COVID, and those impacts on their well-being. It was important to lead these groups into conversations about how communal care and social support can help counter the negative effects of discrimination. Figure 14 shows all attendees at another mental health forum. Different communities of varying ethnic groups, socioeconomic status, and experiences came together to forge supportive safe spaces together.
7.2. Component Application Example: Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health forum, co-organized by co-author, San Diego Mira Mesa Public Library, 2023. Photograph from authors’ personal collection.

Figure 13.

7.3. A Component Application Example: The Community Asset Map

The last form of capital, resistant capital, refers to the skills and knowledge attained when challenging injustice. To practice this, the authors utilize assignments and activities familiar with community organizing, where students engage in didactic dialogues with one another. The classroom becomes an established safe space to discuss issues of injustice they have experienced or observed and to conduct reviews of the academic and gray literature and popular media to better understand these issues and possible solutions. Didactic- and dialogue-based learning have been found to be more effective than other methods of education, including traditional lectures (Hsieh et al. 2024). From these stories, students are taught to not only identify gaps in resources in their communities, but also to identify the strengths and assets they have. Figure 15 shows a co-authors class, where a group of students presented their asset map.
8. Conclusions

SENSEI is a culturally affirming framework designed to guide practitioners as they work with students across contexts. In this framework, teachers are not relegated to facilitating learning experiences in academic settings alone. In SENSEI, a teacher is an individual who co-labor with students to unearth and preserve the funds of knowledge within their communities and cultures. At the heart of the framework is student empowerment, which represents the first two letters of the SENSEI acronym. In SENSEI, student empowerment is actualized through four interrelated components, which are (1) narratives, (2) storytelling, (3) engagement, and (4) identity. Each component influences and complements the others.

8.1. Narratives

Throughout history, the US system of schooling has operated to suppress and disallow funds of knowledge that marginalized communities possess. Schools have functioned to preserve dominant narratives that reduce oppressed groups to stereotypes and tropes. These dominant narratives ensure the continuance of hegemonic power structures that lie at the heart of oppression. If schools are to accomplish the fundamental aims of upward social mobility for students from marginalized communities, then teachers must create spaces for their students to challenge dominant narratives and replace them with counter-narratives. Students and teachers discover and co-construct these counternarratives that function as antidotes to oppressive dominant narratives.

8.2. Storytelling

Counternarratives are strengthened when coupled with storytelling. Storytelling is a vehicle to transmit cultural heritage and plays a critical role in ensuring cultural continuity (Wright and Dunsmuir 2019). The SENSEI framework advocates for intentional practices and approaches for students themselves to tell their own stories. These storytelling practices also serve to firmly embed counternarratives into collective and organizational understandings. The stories, for example, that the students told during the ribbon-cutting ceremony provided a safeguard against the return to gang sites.
8.3. Engagement

The stories students tell around the counternarratives that they construct create an engaging learning environment. When students are empowered to tell their own stories and construct their own knowledge and narratives, they fully engage with their learning experiences (Benzel 2022). When students’ lived experiences and the stories they tell around them are affirmed, they not only engage with learning, but they are also able to further deepen and explore their identities.

8.4. Identity

An identity encapsulates the totality of one’s being. The essence of who an individual is, including their capabilities, histories, cultures, and sense of place in the world. Students construct counternarratives, and they share these counternarratives through various storytelling practices.

8.5. Owning Our Stories: The SENSEI Framework in Action

Final examples where all components of the SENSEI framework was applied were during the 2023 and 2024 Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education (APAHE) conferences in Oakland, California as well as the 2024 California Association of Asian Pacific Leaders in Education (CAAPLE). The framework was utilized in a total of five workshops. One workshop was titled “Owning Our Stories”, and another “Empowering Student Social Justice Leaders via Culturally Affirming Pedagogy”. The workshops drew upon each component of the SENSEI framework to specifically address social justice and experiences in primary to post-secondary educational institutions.

As seen in Figure 16, attendees were asked to engage with one another by sharing their experiences within educational systems and their communities. The groups included a diverse mix of students, faculty, student services staff, and administrators. Attendees were asked guiding questions about their experiences and responded in pairs or trios by sharing personal stories. By storytelling first in smaller pairs, all attendees had the opportunity to share and hear each other, as shown in Figure 17. These stories were then shared in a larger group to identify themes and narratives. As previously mentioned, storytelling builds and preserves community among marginalized groups. Attendees were then challenged to envision counternarratives to identify how negative experiences can be met with the strength-based narratives of their communities. Storytelling and counternarratives challenge “received wisdom” and open “new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live” (Delgado 1989, p. 2414). Attendees then envisioned ways they could feel more supported within their spheres of influence, as shown in Figure 18. These shared stories and narratives, engaging with one another, and dreaming together helped forge a collective identity, which is instrumental to enhancing overall well-being (Oster et al. 2014). McGee (2016) recommends that students of varying identities who find that they share common narratives, e.g., experiencing racial microaggressions on campus, should work together to strategize for collective agency.
Figure 16. Attendees sharing in pairs and trios at a 2024 Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education (APAHE) workshop facilitated by the authors. The room was packed, with many students sitting on the floor when physical seats were not available. The photograph is from the authors’ personal collection.

Figure 17. Attendees sharing in large group at a 2023 Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education (APAHE) workshop facilitated by the authors. The photograph is from the authors’ personal collection.
As lifelong learners, the authors propose the SENSEI framework with the teachings gained from and alongside students, a deep love for community, and the belief in collective liberation. For students from marginalized communities, empowerment and liberation are directly impacted by and interrelated to their environments from local to global. Enacting the SENSEI framework across educational and community contexts is of particular significance at this moment. Increasing efforts to systematically dismantle DEI initiatives and describe them as “woke extremism” threaten to further silence the histories, cultures, and identities of marginalized communities (Dans and Groves 2023, pp. 8, 28, 285). SENSEI is a culturally sustaining framework to challenge and disrupt those oppressive efforts.

Together, the components of SENSEI create space for students to engage with others, their communities, and systems affecting their daily lives. In doing so, a sense of individual and collective identity further solidifies and emerges. This sense of identity is critical to students’ overall well-being and academic success (Williams et al. 2021; Oster et al. 2014). The interrelationships between each of these components activate the potential within students achieving the aim of the framework—student empowerment.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, K.M. and B.N.; writing—original draft preparation, K.M. and B.N.; writing—review and editing, K.M. and B.N.; visualization, K.M. and B.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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