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Keynote Talk: Defining a Problem of Practice

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WORKBOOK

Note-taking Handout

Part I

What's so hard about defining a problem of practice for the EdD?

NOTES:

Part II

What are some common patterns in how EdD students initially define a problem of practice?

Real-world examples:

1. “My equity-focused problem will examine the existence of ableism, the lack of empathy, and the absence of cultural sensitivity and understanding in elementary schools with regard to students with disabilities, both visible and invisible.”
2. “In 2022, XXX Public School was given a [low rating in Special Education] by [the state department of education]. In review of the data, this determination was largely a result of the students with disability annual dropout rate . . . I will focus my research on the problem of the high rate of dropout for students with disabilities.”
3. “When looking at the three-tiered levels of support within the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), my school has systems in place at the Tier I and Tier III . . . Limited professional development has been provided to our staff in the area of Tier II interventions. Providing training opportunities through staff meetings or department meetings, professional learning communities, and professional development opportunities on implementation and tracking of Tier II interventions is needed for fidelity and equity purposes.”

Discuss: Why might these PoPs be difficult to serve as a DiP focus?

What are the implications for EdD Programs?

NOTES:

Part III

How can the understanding and definition of a problem of practice develop?

The start of Michelle's journey

- Review the first 2 pages of Michelle's case

Discuss:

- What is the problematic behavior that she is trying to change?
- From what information or evidence does she initially determine that this is a problem?
- What does she initially think should be done about it?
- What prompts her to think about the problem differently?

NOTES:

Part IV

Where does research come in?

Review the rest of Michelle's case and discuss:

- How did her thinking about the problem change? Why?
- How do the changes in how she defines the PoP implicate a different solution than what she originally assumed?

Reflective prompts for your EdD program

- How well do our courses address the learning needs for developing an actionable PoP?
- How does our approach to advising support students to define a PoP?
- How does our approach to teaching the use of research literature support PoP development?
- How does our DiP structure allow for iterative development of a PoP?

NOTES:

MICHELLE'S PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Cultural Relevance of Instruction

Michelle is an experienced elementary school principal in a school district that serves African American, Hispanic, and white students in fairly equal proportions. The faculties in most of the district schools, including Michelle's, are overwhelmingly white. Standardized test scores document a large achievement gap between students of color and white students. Michelle is concerned about this achievement gap and believes that the district needs some thorough reorientation. She observes that in her district (her school being a case in point), nobody talks about the cultural relevance of what and how they teach. Michelle has been a member of a group of educators called Educators for Social Justice, a group that has read texts about culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). She has come to be convinced that CRP is a necessary part of closing the achievement gap.

For Michelle, both the problem and the solution are clearly aligned. The problem is the achievement gap, and through her reading, she has learned that this gap for students of color may be associated with low expectations and deficit thinking (the blaming of students for their presumed failures) on the part of white teachers who lack cultural sensitivity or cultural competence, issues that CRP addresses head-on. When the superintendent convenes a district equity committee that is charged with bringing CRP to the district, Michelle is drafted for the committee. The committee decides to contract with charismatic speakers who are to inspire faculties. Lists of culturally relevant texts are compiled, and materials are distributed. The committee compiles lists of culturally relevant texts and distributes these lists and samples of culturally relevant material to each school in the district. Every school is charged with setting up an equity committee that organizes conversations and classroom walkthroughs. Michelle is elated.

MICHELLE'S INTUITIVE THEORY OF ACTION

Michelle has framed her problem of practice as the need for teachers to embrace culturally relevant pedagogy. In her theory of action, she intuitively connects the broad problem of the achievement gap and the racial makeup of her students and teachers with what she is convinced is a best practice for this situation. Michelle is surprised when teachers in her school are cool to the equity committee's initiative. She senses reluctance when her enthusiastic presentation of the new project is met with cautious reserve. She begins to suspect that the teachers' reluctance may be evidence of their deficit thinking and cultural insensitivity. In the district equity committee, she defines her problem as "teachers resist CRP" and her solution as "overcoming teachers' resistance to CRP." In other words, in her intuitive theory of action, Michelle *defines the problem as the absence of her solution*. Rather than naming an existing practice that was problematic and that needed elaboration, refinement, or challenge, she named a desired practice that was absent.

The problem with this kind of thinking about change as filling an empty vessel is that soon, the leaders are surrounded by "resisters." Adults, even more than children, do not learn things for which they cannot see the purpose. To see the purpose, they need to connect the leader's desired change -- what the leader sees as an absence -- to what already exists in their thinking and practice, and they need to generate the motivation to do something about it. Pointing out to adults that their problem is that they ought to do what somebody else has identified as their need is not a powerful motivation theory.

A different way of seeing the problem emerges when Michelle discusses it with her assistant principal, Grace. Grace has been the actual nuts-and-bolts instructional leader at the school. Grace cuts to the chase: "You can't expect teachers to have courageous conversations and engage in deep interpretation of culturally relevant texts when you ask them to follow a skill-based prescriptive program with fidelity and when you pressure them on results from weekly quizzes and quarterly benchmarks. You can't expect teachers to suddenly think outside the box when the district has discouraged that for years." Michelle is stunned: the assistant principal is telling her that, far from bringing the solution, Michelle is part of the problem.

She swallows, but she does hear what Grace has to say. For the moment, Michelle decides to suspend her fervent belief in the CRP solution and to reassess the situation by gathering more information about what the teachers in her school are actually doing that is problematic.

Michelle is puzzled. She feels that she must shift her perspective. But what is she missing in her thinking? She settles on observing her teachers' practices and better understanding the causes of why they act the way they do.

MICHELLE'S NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Let's return to Michelle, the elementary school principal who has become a strong advocate of culturally relevant pedagogy as her remedy. How has she described her problem of practice? She began by looking at test score indicators and saw a wide achievement gap between ethnic groups in her district. She has associated the achievement gap with low expectations and deficit thinking on the part of mostly white teachers who she thinks might lack cultural sensitivity or competence. She has jumped from an indicator to a possible cause. In her intervention, she wanted to address the possible cause—deficit thinking—with professional development that raises cultural competence. As described earlier, when her intervention fell on deaf ears, she was at first baffled, then she felt confirmed in her assumption that teachers did not seem to care. But when confronted by her assistant principal, she took a step back and decided to look more carefully.

Michelle's reasoning is not implausible, but from a design development viewpoint, she skips a few steps that she would need to frame and define her problem of practice correctly. The achievement gap is a huge problem in the United States and elsewhere. But she will have to realize that the gap is not a problem of practice, but the result of many practices, and this result is indicated by a measurable achievement gap. Indicators point to problems, but are not the problem "of practice." No designed intervention can close the achievement gap directly; educators

can only change beliefs, attitudes, or practices that may eventually be registered on the indicator. School and district leaders have the strongest influence on adults, not students. So leaders' problem of practice should focus on beliefs, attitudes, or practices of adults who are members of, or associated with, their organization.

Back to Michelle. After talking to her assistant principal, she decides to begin her needs assessment by observing classrooms. She still entertains her idea that there is something culturally remiss with the teachers, but she also looks for evidence that her assistant principal could be right and that her problem of practice is related to the way teachers teach the prescriptive literacy program.

Her observations focus on one thing at first: how teachers relate to students when they teach. She finds that, exceptionally strong teachers notwithstanding, teachers in her school basically follow the script of the program. They assign the texts and use the prompts from the program. They are, for the most part, friendly to the students, encouraging them to participate and giving them space to work with the material. But after working awhile on specific assignments, the teachers move on to the next item in the program, leaving quite a few students confused and behind. When Michelle talks with teachers afterward, they complain that many of their students cannot keep up with the program. The teachers are frustrated with the lack of progress; they feel they themselves are trying hard and are doing their best with the students they have. And they wish there was more support from the parents and the district.

The problematic behavior that Michelle believes she needs to address has now become much more low-inference and concrete than her initial intuitive understanding, which focused on teachers' unwillingness. She now describes her low-inference problematic behavior: Constrained by the pacing of the prescriptive curriculum, teachers move forward without checking for their students' understanding of the material. The teachers seem less concerned about the relevance of the material for the students' cognitive or cultural needs and more concerned with coverage. Defensively, they justify this neglect by pointing to the missing support of parents and the district.

MICHELLE'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM

In addressing the question of culturally relevant instruction, Michelle has decided to observe classrooms to check her assumptions that the teachers at her school have low expectations of students of color because of deficit thinking: the belief that it is the students and their families that are lacking and that their habits justify low expectations. She begins by noticing surface behavior: *symptoms*. They are beliefs, attitudes, or practices that can be seen or heard immediately; in other words, they are readily observable behaviors. For example, she notices a teacher sitting at his desk reading the newspaper during instructional time. She further notices that the classroom is untidy. Something troubles her about this situation. It is something to look into further.

She fills in the symptoms by inferring a *pattern of behavior*. To do so, she makes sense of a set of perceptions or observable behaviors by grouping them together in a pattern that she names. Going back to the teacher mentioned above, she sees him sitting at his desk reading the newspaper, and she sees the untidy classroom. She notices further that his students are sullenly working on work-sheets in individual seat work. When she talks to the teacher, he tells her that students are completing their homework in class. Getting homework back from students, he explains, is virtually impossible and he has given up even assigning it outside of class. Now, these three or four symptoms add up to a pattern that Michelle names: low levels of teacher effort. "Low effort" is an inference. One cannot directly observe it. One needs to construct it or interpret it. Effort, per se, is an abstraction; it is invisible. But Michelle has seen these symptoms before, and to her, they indicate low teacher effort.

Michelle wants to do something about the observed behavior. But to do so, she needs to know the reasons for the behavior pattern. The reasons are inferred. They are imputed to the observed patterns of behavior, but are removed from direct observations. These inferences often draw on common sense, but when designers need to see them in a broader context and explicitly name this context, they need social theory.

Michelle remembers reading in some articles that low effort is a common result of certain teachers' low expectations of their students. This finding seems to be a good fit with the pattern she has observed. She infers that the teacher has low expectations of himself and his students. But then there are other causal inferences that she could make: the teacher is burned out; the teacher is angry about having been involuntarily assigned to this class. So she can't be sure about her inference without gathering further information and testing her assumptions. When she asks the teacher how he feels about teaching at this school, she discovers that he hates being there. He gives two reasons: he believes that the community does not care about the children's educational success and that the faculty is resigned to this lack of interest and no longer cares either.

Note that the diagnosis of the problem should not be the absence of Michelle's preferred solution, as in "I just know that the low effort the teacher puts into his work is due to low expectations that he has for his disadvantaged students. So I need an intervention that addresses low expectations and deficit thinking, and I happen to have a solution to which I had been committed all along." If educational leaders diagnose problems this way, they will never know what thoughts or actions by the teachers are problematic, and the leaders' ideas of change will revolve around filling an empty vessel. But learners are not empty vessels. They have established patterns of thinking and feeling that somehow have worked for them. Leaders need to change these patterns. But to do that, leaders need to know what these patterns are.

MICHELLE'S DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM

In light of her initial observations about culturally relevant instruction in her racially balanced school district, Michelle returns to her district committee members. She proposes that they think about their problem of practice more deeply before they proceed to implementing a solution. They are open to listening to what Michelle has to say, but this does not mean that she has their agreement or support.

Michelle strives to become an intellectual leader in her committee, and with the help of resources drawn from her doctoral program, she decides to read up on some literature that can help her understand the problem. She consults several topics in the literature: instruction that fosters student academic engagement; cultural relevance; implementing prescriptive programs; teacher expectations and defensiveness, especially around class and ethnicity; and organizational culture of schools. First she finds that academic engagement involves not only teachers' subject-matter knowledge, cultural competence, and ability to activate student voice, but also instructional complexity, instructional flexibility, and classroom management issues. Prescriptive programs, she concludes, are perhaps useful as scaffolds for less-experienced teachers, but in the long run, the programs do not facilitate student engagement. She realizes that cultural relevance is not just about culturally relevant content, but also about developing a curious, open, and positive attitude on the part of teachers toward the life experiences of students. Moreover, cultural relevance is also about the teachers' own work lives as educational professionals.

Even though societal influences are strong, teacher expectations and explanations of success and failure seem to be influenced by organizational expectations, routines, norms, and discourses at local schools. So, Michelle concludes,

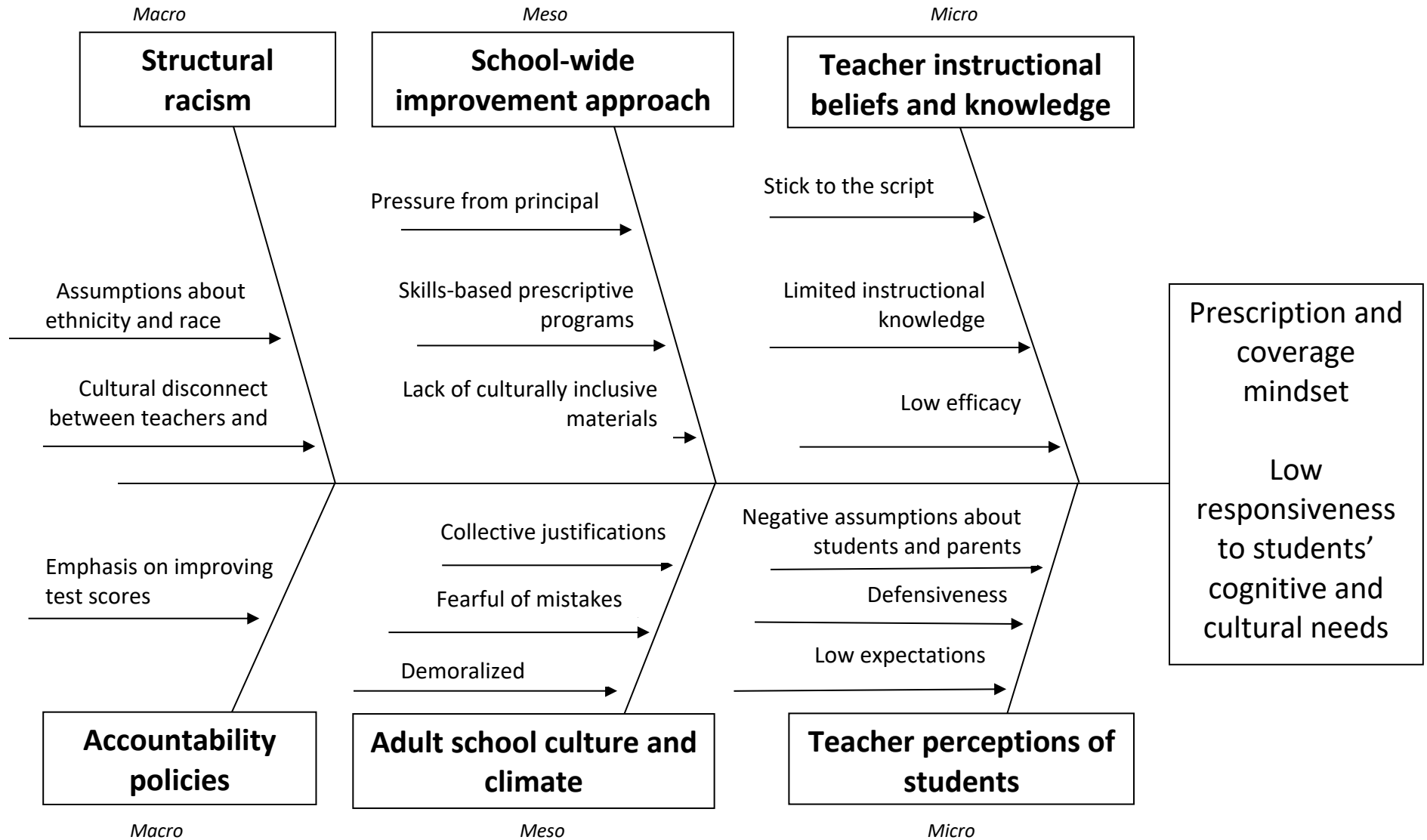
the organizational routines (i.e., prescriptive programs) and organizational expectations (especially around teacher performance) are essential in shaping how teachers teach and relate to students. Organizational cultures develop collective justifications that people use in order to feel good about themselves when they face challenging problems in their environments.

Michelle senses that the district equity committee is hesitant to follow her in her analysis. So she finds two other principals who are interested in looking at this issue more deeply. She suggests that they look for evidence of what she has now identified as important causes of disengagement in students of color: limited teacher knowledge and instructional competence, obstructive organizational routines and expectations (including her own as a leader), teachers' defensive responses to failure, teachers' negative assumptions about students and families, and teachers' limited professional curiosity. The data from the three schools suggest that quite a number of teachers in the district feel that they have low efficacy in teaching the more complex parts of the curricular programs and that they cling to prescriptive programs. The principals—Michelle included—seem not too concerned about program implementation with fidelity, but they do want to see high performance on the six-week benchmarks attached to the curricular programs. And the principals' supervisors insist on careful monitoring. Feeling pressure to deliver the numbers, the teachers therefore seem to stick to the script. When they fall short of delivering on the benchmark tests, they deflect criticism by pointing to students' and families' deficits and clamor for more district support. Michelle concludes that teachers' feelings of low efficacy in teaching outside the prescriptive programs and the pressure to perform on tests aligned to the programs has created a prescription and coverage mind-set in teachers that desensitizes them to their students' needs.

After their extended needs assessment, Michelle's group of three has a different idea about their problem, and their search for solutions has moved in a different direction. Initially, Michelle perceived the problem intuitively as one of white teachers who lacked cultural sensitivity and a willingness to engage with equity goals. And as a solution, she was thinking about two measures: workshops in which culturally relevant curricula would be introduced and charismatic

speakers who could create an awareness of the problem. After the second round of needs assessment, this perception of the problem has not disappeared, but it has expanded. Work organization, pressures and sanctions, teachers' self-defense mechanisms, and a solid prescription and coverage mind-set now play a larger role. The search for solutions has moved outward toward organizational mechanisms and inward towards fine-grained instructional competence. Michelle and her two principal colleagues conclude that culturally relevant pedagogy needs to be folded into a new adult learning culture around instruction. Administrators need to relax narrow curricular pressures. Teachers need to be encouraged to keenly observe student learning, to approach their work with curiosity, and to tailor their instruction to student learning needs encountered in their daily lessons.

Michelle's Fishbone Diagram*

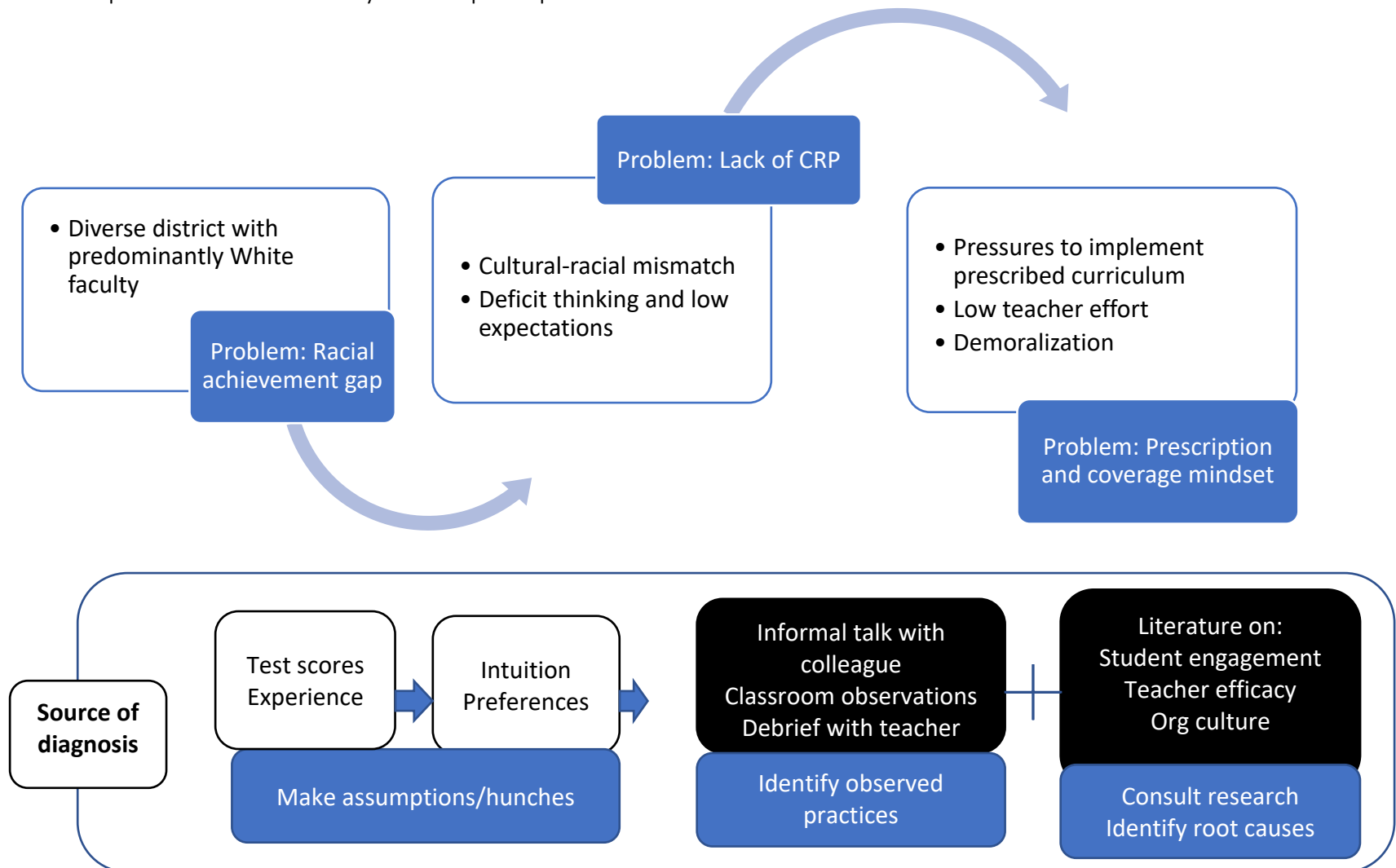


* Based on Mintrop (2016). *Design-based school improvement: A practical guide for education leaders*. Harvard Education Press.

Defining, framing, and diagnosing an equity-relevant problem of practice:

Michelle's journey *

Michelle: Experienced elementary school principal

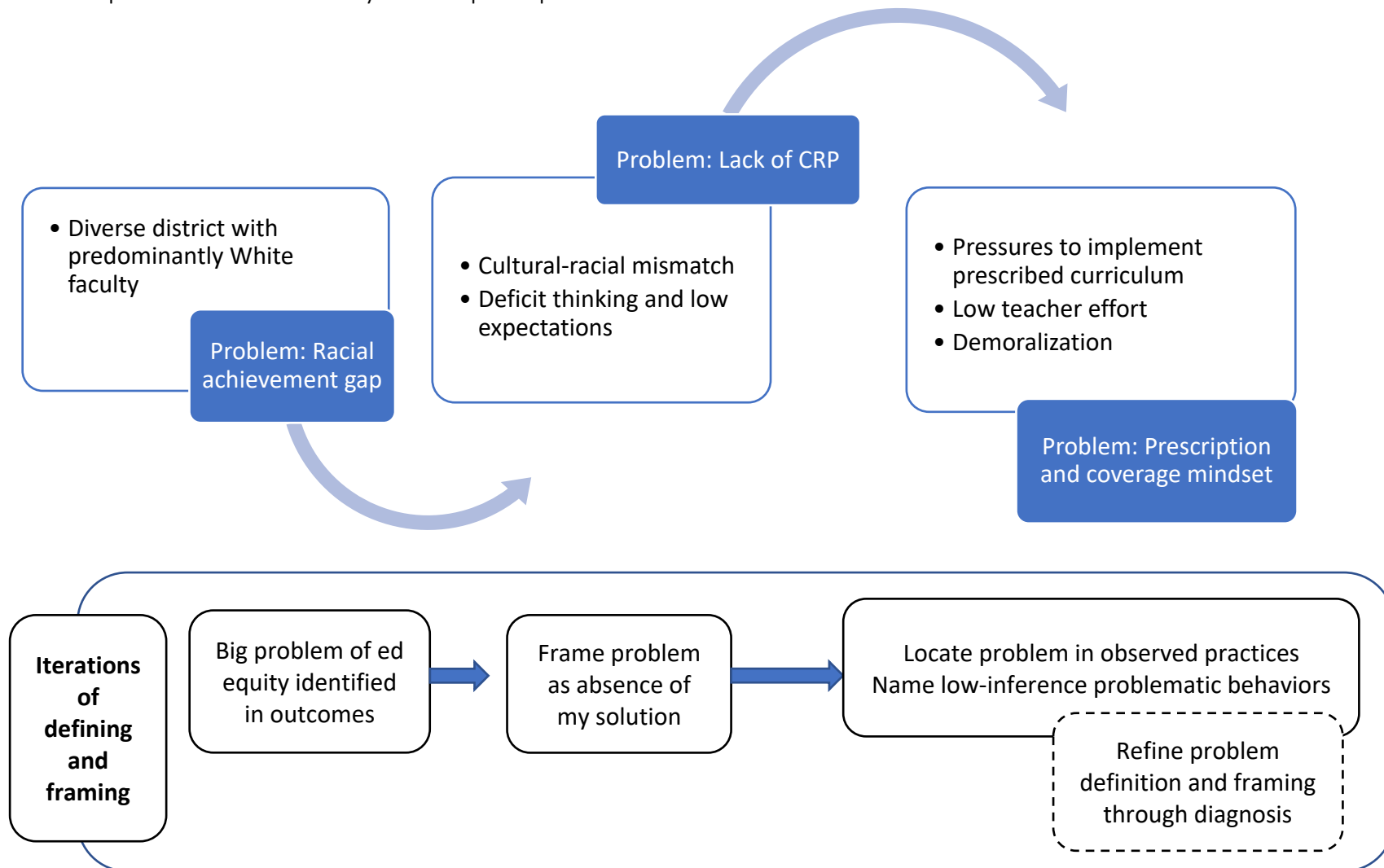


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Getting Started

Key Sources Consulted by the Designers Featured in This Book

Michelle: Cultural Relevance of Instruction

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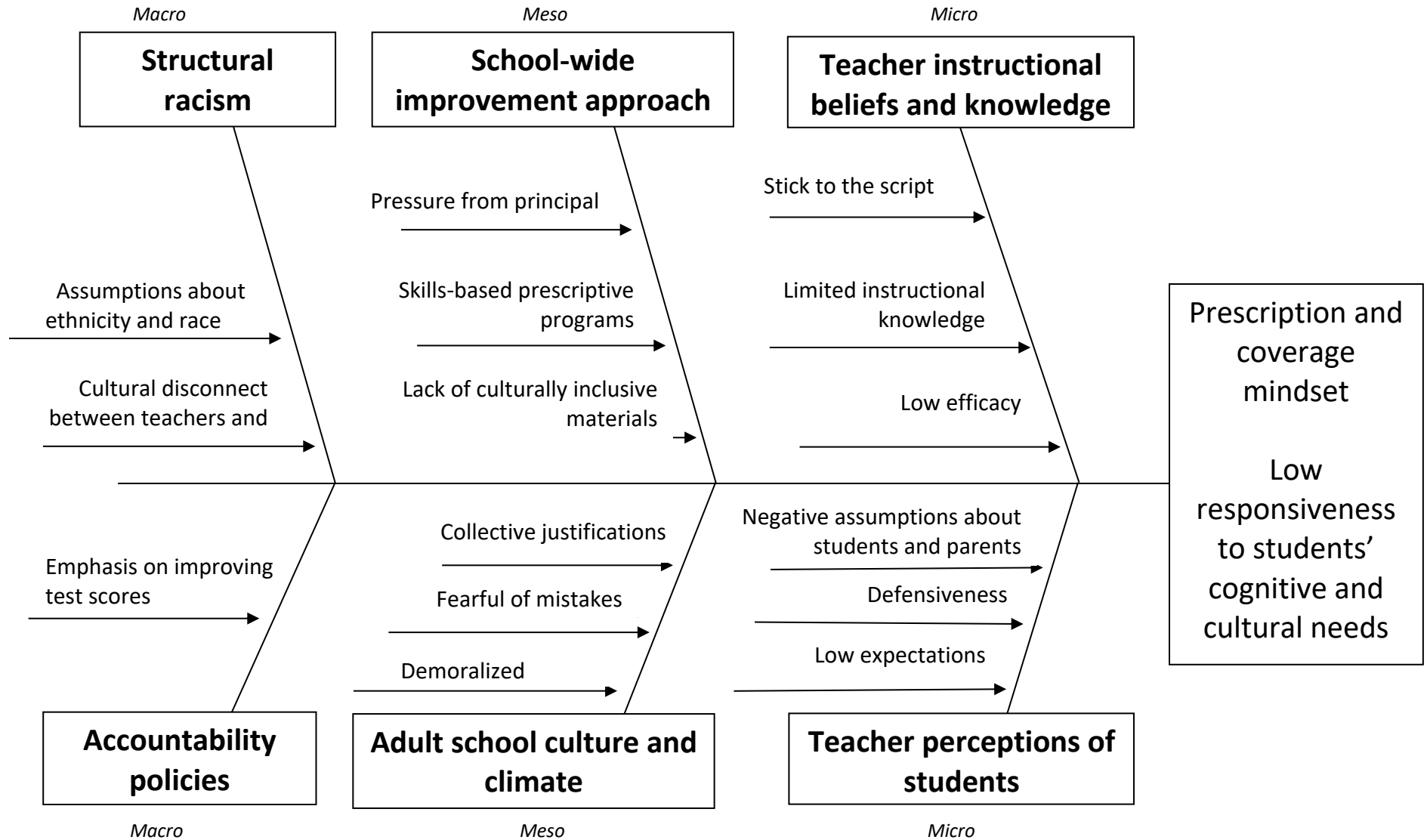
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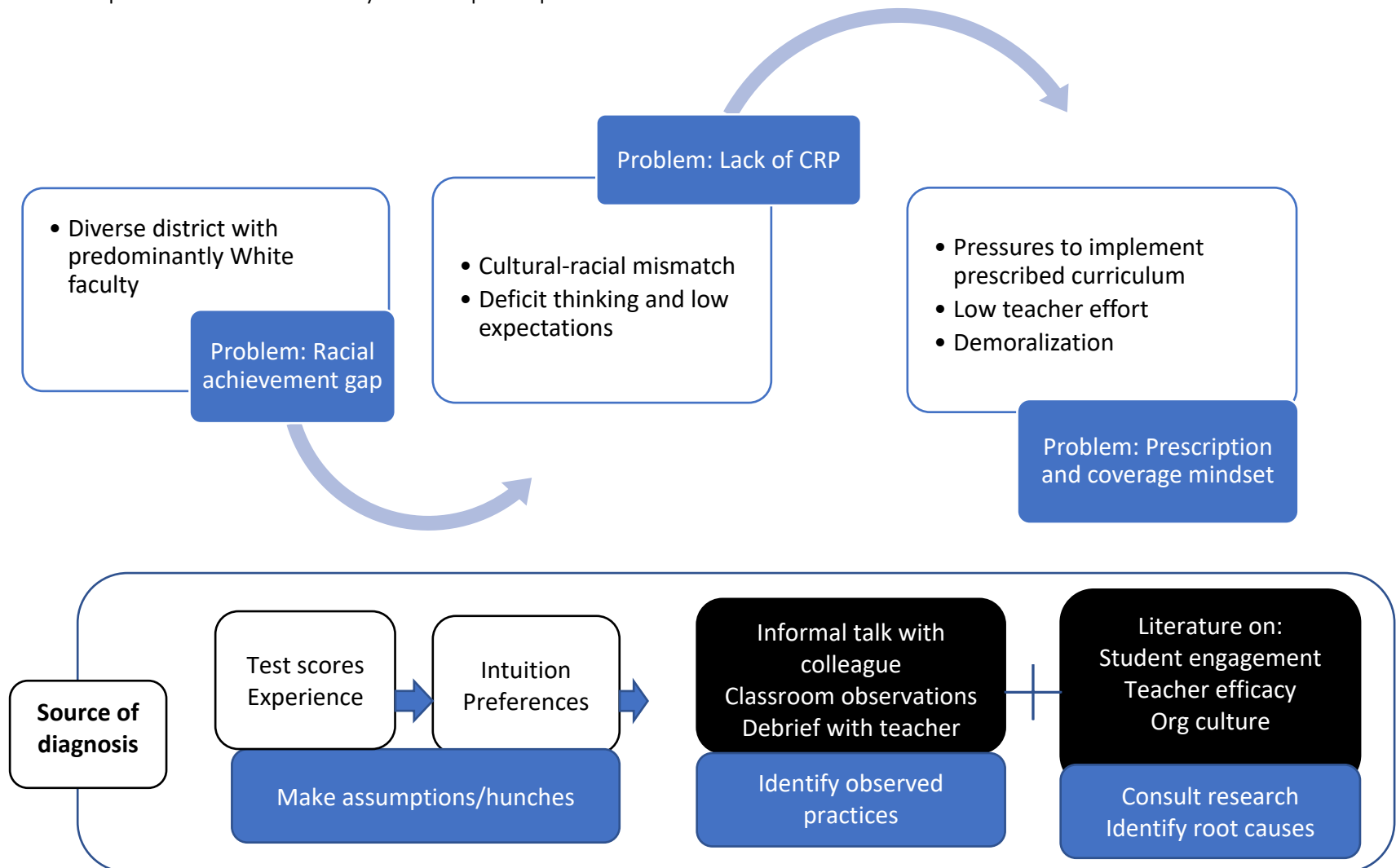


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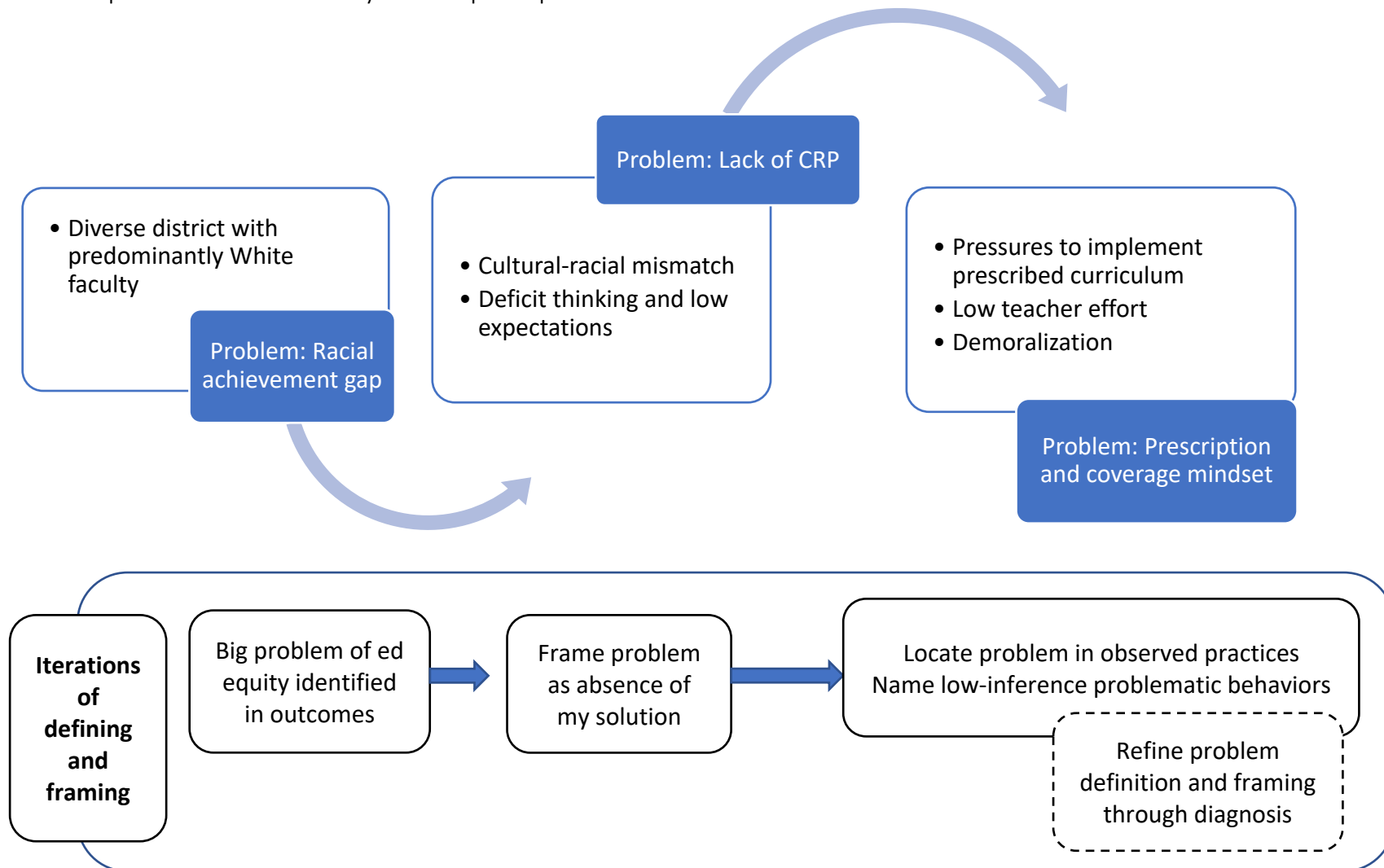


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Assignment from University of Pittsburgh EdD Program - EDUC 3006 Practitioner Inquiry 2

**adapted from Mintrop (2016) Design-based School Improvement*

Actionable Problem of Practice Worksheet

My *Problem of Practice* is **actionable** because it is:

1. **Urgent for the organization**—problem arises out of a perceived need

DO: List three needs that make your PoP urgent

2. **Actionable**—problem exists within the individual's sphere of influence

DO: List three ways this problem can be influenced by you/your role

3. **Feasible**—can be addressed in a limited time frame with the available resources

DO: Provide 3 pieces of evidence that ensure you can begin an improvement process within the timeframe of your DiP

4. **Strategic**—problem is connected to the goals of the larger organization

DO: How is this problem related to your organization's larger strategic goals/plan?

5. **Tied to a specific set of practices**—narrowed to specific practice(s) that have a good chance of improvement

DO: What type of practices (procedures, programs, activities, rituals) exist in your organization that are related to your problem and might support your solution development?

6. **Forward looking**—problem reaches towards the next level of work

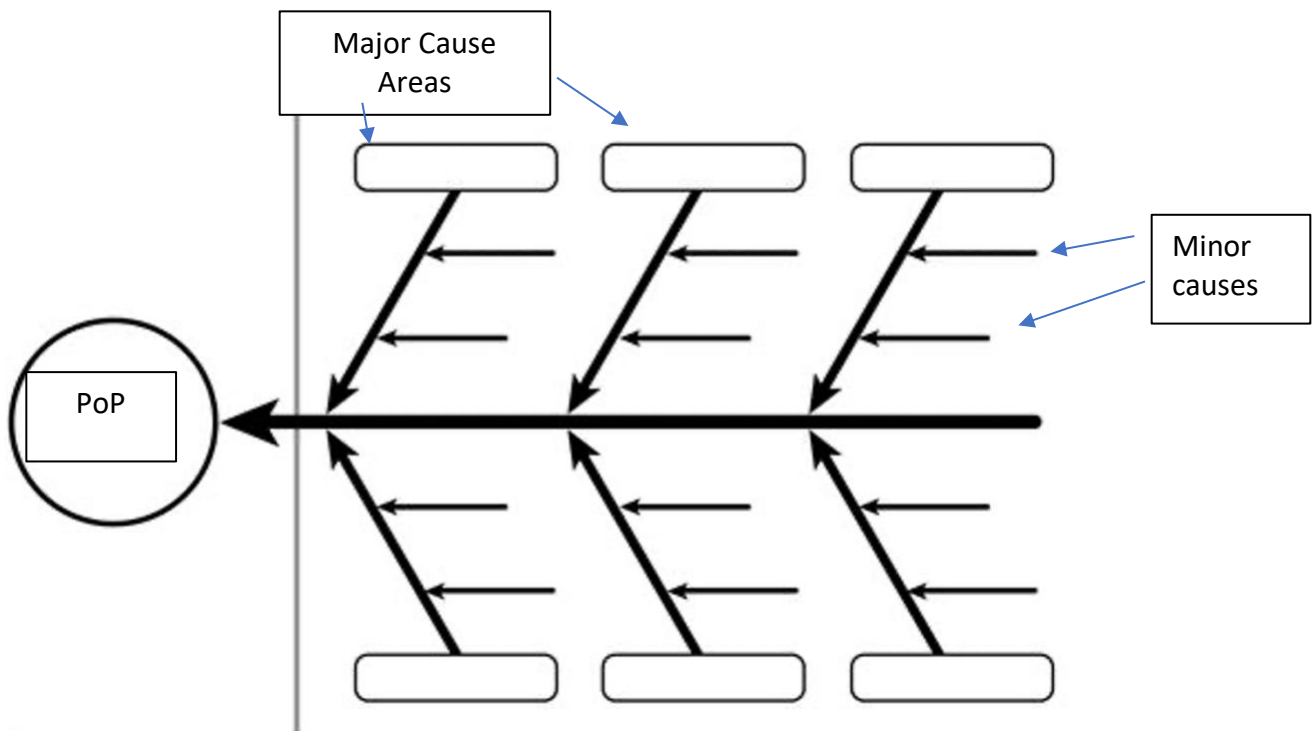
DO: How might solving this problem connect to advancing your work and the work of your organization to the next level?

Assignment from University of Pittsburgh EdD Program - EDUC 3006 Practitioner Inquiry 2

Ishikawa Fishbone Diagram - Root Cause Analysis

Ishikawa Fishbone Diagrams aim to get at the root causes of a problem; not just the symptoms.

Ishikawa Fishbone Diagram Analysis (10 points): Using evidence generated from literature, empathy interviews, your experience, and systems understanding, students will complete an Ishikawa Fishbone Diagram (aka root cause analysis) for their Problem of Practice. Students will turn in **three drafts** of the Fishbone Diagram accompanying the appropriate written assignment (Problem Description, User Description, and Organizational Systems Description) receive feedback from an Instructor, and then submit a final Ishikawa Fishbone Diagram as part of the final AIP Part A submission.



Fishbone diagrams are root cause analyses of your overall problem (effect). List your PoP in the head of the fish. Then list the major cause areas (e.g., people, department, policies, processes, resources, etc) in the boxes that contribute to the creation of your problem. For each cause, use the **5 Whys** to brainstorm the minor causes that contribute to or are created by the major cause. Seek as many minor causes as possible. Drafts will be done in different colors so that your grader can see the progress between the drafts.

Draft #1: Problem Description

Assignment from University of Pittsburgh EdD Program - EDUC 3006 Practitioner Inquiry 2

Considering the literature you have read, your PoP statement, and your own experiences with the problem, generate the first draft of your Ishikawa Fishbone Diagram. Once you have your fishbone, you will write a description of the major and minor causes of your Problem of Practice (2 pages max). Turn in both your summary and your fishbone diagram together.

Note: Draft #1 should have minor causes listed in PURPLE.

Draft #2: User Description

Considering your positionality and your empathy interviews with users (persons affected by the problem), add to your understanding of the problem by adding more root causes in your Ishikawa Fishbone Diagram. This draft will be due with your User Description.

Note: Draft #2 should have minor causes listed in GREEN.

Final Draft #3: Organizational Systems Description

Considering the document analysis and organizational systems description, add to your understanding of the problem root causes in your fishbone. This draft will be due with your Organizational Systems Description.

Note: Draft #3 should have minor causes listed in ORANGE.