

## Critical Engagement Module 3

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### **Part I: Culturally Relevant Critical Reflection**

This module's readings proved a little difficult for me, not because I had trouble comprehending the concepts; but rather, it forced me into some reflection that I found to be uncomfortable. It became clear, very early on in my educational career, that critical reflection of my practice on a daily basis was going to be vital to my success and growth as an educator. I have asked myself repeatedly, the questions that Howard (2003) poses to his teacher education students, "Who am I? What do I believe? Does who I am and what I believe have ramifications for the students I teach?" However, that reflection has largely been generically pedagogical in scope. While always endeavoring, through the use of empathy, to reduce, as much as I can, bias into my dealings with other people, I am embarrassed to admit that I cannot remember explicitly contemplating Howard's questions from a culturally relevant point of view. As I have tried to rectify this over the past several weeks, two-thirds of the way through this course it is clear to me that I have some work left to do as it relates to interacting with my students of diverse cultural backgrounds.

While it is always on my mind when designing lessons that they be "culturally relevant, racially affirming, and socially meaningful" (Howard, 2003) for the diversity in my class, I realize, now, that where I may fall short, at times, is slipping into what Palmer (as cited in Howard, 2003) refers to as "teach(ing) who we are". As a white, male, who has never had to

think about being white, it often does not occur to me that my “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1973 as cited by Howard, 2003) is probably quite different than my students’. In fact, it is likely that there are also various misunderstandings because of age, gender, sexual identity, religion, and socioeconomic position. There is where culturally relevant critical reflection is so important. I see this as contemplating the explicit, and more difficult, implicit behaviors that can be altered by differences in race and culture, leading to an unknowing affectation of one’s decisions.

I caught myself about three weeks into this school year, guilty of branding a new student of mine through what Howard (2003) refers to as “deficit-based thinking”. I wrongly made assumptions about an African American young man because of the way he dressed and socialized with his African-American friends. In my mind, he was just another boy I have pigeon-holed dozens of times: not serious about his education, potential discipline problem, probably behind the curve cognitively, school not valued at home. The realization when he proved to be one of my very best, and respectful, students, is one of which I am still (and probably always will be) ashamed.

Ashamed, because I know better. I go out of my way to form relationships with all my students. In fact, it is likely that before I learn a student’s name, I will know something personal about him or her. As a history teacher that has the privilege of co-teaching with an English Language Arts teacher, we are easily able to structure early assignments that give us insight into each child: personal narratives, personal timelines, interviews with others who remember timeline events and learning that event from a different perspective, activities that reveal how students have overcome obstacles in their lives, etc. This introduction then allows me to help the students make connections with historical events, or literary situations, and their own

experiences. I just always operated with the satisfaction that all those personal connections I made excused me from any deep thinking about who I am, what I believe, and how those answers have ramifications for the students I teach. I was enlightened. I now know that implicit bias is unavoidable, and the only way to combat it is through deep reflection, open-minded collaboration with people from different cultures, and the good intention to always strive to be sensitive to that bias.

I was counseling a student of mine, who has gravitated to me and my room as her safe space. She hails from Compton, made her way to inner-city Columbus, and has had a fairly rough upbringing. She has been arrested, abused, neglected, and forced to grow up far too early. We were discussing a problem she was having with another teacher, and it all was so clear to me now how the conflict was a result of a misinterpretation between “European American cultural values” (Howard, 2003) and her experience as mixed race Latinx and African-American growing up in a lower socioeconomic class. The student, purposely trying to be as respectful as she could be, still came off as obstinate and hostile to the white teacher, because of differences in cultural capital that affected tone, language, and non-verbal communication. Because of the tradition of power relative to the student, and expected compliance experienced and demanded by the white teacher, (Lucas & Villegas, 2013) my mediation in this matter, which should have not been necessary, was, because of a lack of “understanding that language, culture, and identity are deeply interconnected.” (Lucas & Villegas)

## **Part II: Understanding and Support Emerging Bilinguals**

A Nepali student of mine was just moved from my general education class to a special ed intervention environment. The problem is, and I communicated this to the guidance department, I

still have no idea whether the struggle for this student is due to a cognitive issue, or because of difficulty with the English language. I am afraid that it is the latter. My uncertainty revolves around the idea that Lucas and Villegas (2013) put forth, that, "...conversation fluency in a second language develops much more quickly than academic language skills." The student seemed to understand and communicate with me, just fine. However, Cummins (2000, as cited by Lucas and Villegas, 2013) reminds us that academic language is quite a bit more difficult than the ability to engage in informal conversation. In my classroom that issue is likely exacerbated by the fact that it is a double-blocked, double the kids environment that by its inquiry-based and project-based nature is already very chaotic to the uninitiated. The problem is that the influx of Nepali students is relatively new for our district, and, to date, we are still ill-equipped to service those children who come to us with limited English proficiency, effectively. So, they are passed off to Special Ed., a situation where they can at least get more individual attention, but unfortunately from educators who are not necessarily trained in ESL techniques. For my students affected by this, it probably is also why the Lucas and Villegas (2013) and Klingner and Artiles (2003) readings drove home, to me, the problem we face in American education with how to effectively service these English language learners.

Despite Klingner and Artiles' (2003) suggestion that professional development be provided to expand our knowledge in this matter, our district provides only intermittent professional development to general education teachers. Our ESL specialists are amazing, but overworked because of this chasm. Whenever possible, we do try to include an ESL teacher when evaluating whether or not the child qualifies for Special Ed services. Unfortunately it is rare that an ESL expert observes these students in a classroom setting, as Klingner and Artiles

recommend. Usually that observation is completed by our school psychologist, or speech pathologist. Another process I would like to see implemented in my school is a parallel ESL intervention response team using the response to intervention model (Klingner & Artiles), like the one we already have in place for students who need more support for cognitive issues.

One strategy that I use in my room for these borderline cases, is to allow the students to show mastery in non-traditional ways. Very often, it is just a matter of sitting down with the student and letting him or her explain things verbally to me. It is a much less stressful environment than formal assessments, and allows the students to more easily make connections to their own experiences through our discussions. It does not necessarily address the issue that the student's understanding of academic language needs to improve, but it allows time for those students to acquire that fluency.

Another way I try to support English language learners is by providing many choices, through differentiation, for how they can learn and master the material. For any one concept or standard, I will have up to five or six different types of assignments to meet as many different learning styles and abilities as I can. If those are acceptable, I always include a "Choose Your Own Adventure" option that allows the student and teacher to collaborate on what would be the best way for them to learn the content. It's not always perfect, and more often than not creates a ton more work for me on the front end, but it is the best way I have found in my room to meet as many kids' needs as possible.

## References

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