Equity by Design Podcast Series
Episode 3:

Developing Critical Consciousness through Professional Learning

This is a transcript of the above-named podcast, which can be found on the Great Lakes Equity Center website. To access the podcast directly, use the following address: http://podcast.iu.edu/upload/glec/2d35ecf3-514f-48e0-ae82-b22ae3206a45/2014_4_7_CritCon_Draft3_emm.mp3

Children: 3, 2, 1… [cheer]

Male Narrator: Hello and welcome to the Great Lakes Equity Center. Our mission at the Great Lakes Equity Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality research-based education and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups.

Female Narrator: Today's topic is our feature brief in our Equity by Design publication. Equity by Design briefs strive to provide educators with free, accessible, and applicable information. All briefs rely on current research and practice in the fields of educational reform and culturally responsive pedagogy. Go to Greatlakesequitycenter.org to access and subscribe to this quarter's brief and our other publications like our e-newsletter, the Equity Dispatch, and our e-bulletin, Equity Now!

Host Erin Macey: Hello and welcome to the Great Lakes Equity Center. Today, I'm talking with Dr. Sharon Radd, lead author of the Equity by Design brief, "Developing Critical Consciousness through Professional Learning." Welcome Sharon!

Dr. Sharon Radd: Thank you! It's wonderful to be here with you today.

Host Erin Macey: Let's dive right in. The brief presents an argument that critical consciousness is an essential part of transformative professional learning. First of all, what is critical consciousness?

Dr. Sharon Radd: Well, in the brief, we define critical consciousness as "An active state of awareness seeking to identify the beliefs and language that obscure systemic inequities." So, there are a few big ideas in that definition. It starts with the idea that there are systemic inequities throughout our education system. In other words, *as a system*, our way of doing public education in the United States is inherently unfair.

But, these *ways we are organized*, the ways we do things that are inherently unfair, they are not immediately apparent to us - - in fact, they are often *transparent*. Meaning, we look right through them and we don't see them. And even when we know that the system as a whole is unfair and unjust, it can be really hard to see which aspects of the system make it that way.

So, critical consciousness is a cognitive and behavioral way that we interact with our thoughts, our words and statements, and our actions, and those of others, so that we can more clearly detect and discern where we are participating in and contributing to the unfairness, and where we are working to reverse it.

Finally, in the definition, we call this an *active* state of awareness, because our work in this regard must be constant and ongoing - - there's not a moment when we "get it" and then we're done - - there's always be new things to learn and to see. None of us are exempt from the need to be critically conscious *if* we want to turn the tide of educational inequity.

Host Erin Macey: Ok, so then it makes sense that the two professional learning structures discussed in the brief – reflection journals and critical communities of practice – are both ongoing. So we can't sit through a lecture or workshop and suddenly we are transformed. This is work we're constantly doing, and it seems to involve an intense focus on our own assumptions and ways of seeing the world.

Dr. Sharon Radd: Yes, that is really, really important. It's because of how our mind works to make meaning and make decisions. It helps us to understand that our mind is like an iceberg. One of the key characteristics of icebergs, as you know, is that the vast majority of their mass is beneath the surface. Our minds are similar in that way because the overwhelming majority of what goes on in our minds is beneath the surface. It's in our unconscious and in our subconscious. If you compared your brain to a football field, your neo-cortex – which is the thinking, planning, rationalizing, conscious part of your brain – it make up only about an 8 foot by 10 foot rectangle of an entire football field. It's actually really miniscule!

The impact that this has on our thinking is profound. In our conscious mind we work, hard to make sense and to seek consistency, but in our unconscious mind there is so much more going on and that influences our conscious decision making but most of the time, we don't notice that that's going on. In our unconscious mind there are beliefs, assumptions and values – these are thoughts about how the world works, how it can be changed, what things ought to happen in a particular situation, and most deeply, how we arrange and order our understanding of the world. This helps us to be more efficient – we really need our mind to function in this way - but it can also be damaging because if we assume that the world is fair, that advancement is always, or even mostly based on merit, that our education system and practices are always based on best practices and what is best for all children, then we accept the way we do things without even questioning them. We don't ask key questions about whether classroom practices,

homework or discipline policies, or standardized testing movements are *truly* fair and equitable or even if they actually work to achieve the goal that we're seeking.

Host Erin Macey: So in the brief, there is a set of questions we can ask – either in the journals or in a practice group – to help get at some of these assumptions that might lead to inequity. Can we walk through them using an example?

Dr. Sharon Radd: Yep, definitely. There are many examples, but let's just take the idea of "readiness." There is this prevailing idea in education that that kids should be "ready" for school or for particular classes.

Host Erin Macey: Absolutely. That's an idea that really cuts across the K-12 continuum, from the "kindergarten readiness movement" to the idea that certain students should not be allowed to move on to another grade or class until they are "prepared" all the way to AP requirements and things like that. So it can have a major impact on a student's academic trajectory and it can also have an impact day-to-day if teachers hold certain expectations about how a student should show up to class: Are they on time? Are they in a uniform? Do they have a pencil or particular book? Are they focused? You name it. So when students don't meet these expectations, they may miss class or the teacher may make assumptions about the student or the family…So the first question has to do with describing the practice. It involves asking, "What do I do?"

Dr. Sharon Radd: So, let's work through this using this idea of "kindergarten readiness" – and you've given lots of great examples, but we'll focus on this one. There are a lot of expectations out there about what a student should be able to do when they enter kindergarten. I just did a very quick google search and it came up with so many hits, but it revealed sites that said things like, "Prepare your child and yourself for the beginning of kindergarten, from meeting kindergarten entrance expectations to the first day of school."

Another one was talking about a class and it said, "…for students who will start **kindergarten** next fall. Sign up for this program that will] help prepare more students for success on day one of kindergarten." And then there was one that was titled "10 Classroom Survival Skills to Teach Your Children before They Go to School."

So you can see the language here suggests that in order to meet expectations, to be successful, and even to survive within a school system, children are supposed to arrive on day one knowing and doing certain things. This can shape how teachers set up their classrooms and how they respond if students don't have particular skills. So a teacher can begin by examining a question like, "What do I expect students to know and be able to do when they come to my classroom?" and "How do I respond when they don't?"

Host Erin Macey: Ok, so from here, we want educators to consider what assumptions underlie these expectations and responses.

Dr. Sharon Radd: Yep, one of the things that often happens when we start to address educational equity is that we start to see what we call deficit thinking. Deficit thinking

happens when we see a difference as less than. And it comes up on us in very sneaky ways and it really has devastating effects on the learning relationship.

So for example, if a child comes to school and is not “ready” then sometimes we assume that the family has failed the child in some way…that the family has done less than for the child. And so we look down on the family in a way that is negative and judgmental, by thinking, for example, that the family just doesn’t care about education or worse, that they just don’t care about their child.

Now this, I think, is particularly damaging to relationships, because our parenting relationships - these are the places where the pressure is on the most, where the stakes can feel the highest, and we can feel the most vulnerable. So as educators, we need to honor that and treasure that with the families we work with, not dismiss it or worse, ascribe these negative intents to one another.

So that said, it’s important to know that deficit thinking can also come from a more benevolent place. For example, we might say that the parents just didn’t have time to help their child become kindergarten ready because they had to work three jobs. Or we might say, with empathy, that they just didn’t know any better. I can tell you this, and I’ve been a parent for 20 years now - - none of us know any better! We all, as parents, don’t fully know what we’re doing and we make tons of mistakes. In a certain way, it’s a wonder that our kids survive us! So to think that *those* parents don’t know any better, as if other parents, parents like us, do know better - - it’s really unfair and its damaging to the learning relationships.

So as educators, yes, it is always better to come from a place of compassion rather than negative judgment in our relationships with students and families, but in both of these examples the educator assumes that it is the family’s responsibility to do certain things and then the educator sees the family as deficit in one way or another, that the family didn’t do enough of the right things.

Host Erin Macey: And I’m already beginning to see the ways in which this sort of answers the third question in the brief, “Who benefits from these assumptions and who does not?” If we can place the blame families for what children do or don’t have when they come to school, then some of the pressure we may feel is relieved – we might let ourselves off the hook and continue with business as usual.

Dr. Sharon Radd: Yep, that’s absolutely true. Also, we have to look beyond that to ask, “Which groups of students does it benefit and which groups does it disadvantage?” and basically, it disadvantages those families who do things differently than we would...those who come from a different cultural background or a different set of resources than the teacher or even just a different set of beliefs about the role of family and the role of schools. This really actually matches what we know. Overwhelmingly, the system, which is made up of white, middle class folks, is failing kids of color and kids who live in poverty.

Host Erin Macey: So we've talked about why we might use a reflection journal or a critical community of practice to get at some of those beneath-the-surface assumptions about why an educator or an educational system does what it does, and we've used that space to see who benefits and who does not. And one of things we often see over and over again when we're asking who benefits is that students from particular racial groups or income brackets – as you said - tend to fare worse than others. So this is not just about a single educator in a classroom making choices that disadvantage particular students – it's much bigger than that.

Dr. Sharon Radd: When we look at the public school system and see that something like 85% of all teachers are white females, then it would be logical to assume that there is a certain cultural set of cultural norms that are dictating and pervading our educational system. Basically, cultural norms are a set of collective mental models. If we want to turn the tide of educational inequity then we need to unearth our mental models, examine them closely and revise and refine them so that they are more accurate, complete, and just. We simply cannot achieve educational equity without looking at the underlying assumptions, mental models, and systems of thinking that we used to create our current system.

So let me give you one more example about deficit thinking. Over the course of my career I have been able to work with many people who serve in this very important role we often called a home-school liaison. These professionals are hired by the school district and they serve as a bridge between the school and families. Increasingly, these professionals are taking on a role that is intended to create a bridge between the cultures of families and the cultures of schools.

I once worked with a liaison who was working in a medium-sized district and this district was set in a changing community. There was a meat packing plant in the district and it employed lots of immigrants and refugees. One family in the district consisted of a mom who was a refugee and who worked the second shift in the plant, and her three children, two of whom were in elementary school and one was a toddler. The liaison, when she was telling me this story, told me that every day the mother would pick her children up from school and take them to childcare before she left to go to her shift at the plant. After she worked her shift, then she needed to go pick up her children from child care -- now mind you this is in the middle of the night, probably midnight or 1 AM, so the children were sleeping and needed to be woken in order to get home. She would bring her children home, and put them back to bed, and then trying to get some sleep herself. So now it's often 3 AM or so before she gets to sleep.

In the morning, she needed to wake her children and get them to school by 7:30 AM. As you can imagine, the children were often late, but almost always it was by only five minutes or maybe occasionally up to 15 minutes. Then, after she got her older children

to school, she still needed to stay up and tend to her toddler for the day, until she picked up the school-age children after school and repeated the whole routine again.

When the liaison told me the story, she was focused on the fact that the mom was bringing the kids late to school and she concluded the story by saying that she was working to teach the mother to be more responsible. Think about that. That's what she said, and she said it more than once.

Now, this liaison was a caring and committed professional, and she was an immigrant herself. She really cared about this mom, and she cared about the kids, and she cared that the kids experienced success in school. And yet, I'm not sure that I could be as responsible as that mother who was working a second shift, sleeping very little, providing quality care to her children by all reports, and getting her children to school every day. So the idea that this mother needed to learn to be *more* responsible, as if she was not already extraordinarily responsible, that was just startling to me.

But you can see how the narrative of the school and social systems, which tend to be built around assuming that children live in two-parent families with parents who work during the day, created this framing of the mother. The narrative of the school system says that if children are late to school than their parents aren't responsible enough. You can see how the idea that the school might help the mother to become more responsible had benevolent, compassionate thinking behind it and yet it really missed key equity indicators. It missed the fact that only people with brown skin were working the second and third shifts at the plant. It missed the fact that the community did not provide childcare options for the family that allowed a single parent to work a second or third shift at the factory and not have to wake their child in the middle of the night. It failed to assess that the problem was equally related to the fact that the school had an inflexible tardy policy as it was to the fact that the mother struggled to get the children to school before 7:45 AM every day. It fundamentally blamed the mother and saw her as less than. This is how deficit thinking works.

So if you see the mother as needing to learn to be more responsible, then you focus all of your energy on helping her to be better and that influences the type of relationship that you have. But, if you see the mother as extraordinarily responsible, as I do, than you start to look more fully at what sorts of options might be available to ensure that the children can attend school and participate fully in the program. You also interact with the mother with respect – with really deep and profound respect. And we all know how much more fully engaged we are when we're interacting with someone who profoundly respects us and how that compares to how we interact with someone who sees us as less than or lacking.

Host Erin Macey: That's a really powerful example. So what words of wisdom do you have for educational stakeholders who want to bring this active thinking about assumptions to school spaces?

Dr. Sharon Radd: Proceed with caution! And courage. It is not easy work to identify and disrupt assumptions, so sometimes we might be encouraged to carry a sign that says “don’t shoot the messenger.”

David Whyte writes, and I love this quote and use it often:

> Eventually we realize that not knowing what to do is just as real and just as useful as knowing what to do. Not knowing stops us from taking false directions. Not knowing what to do, we start to pay real attention…If you think you know where you are, you stop looking.

The one thing that I found in my journey of doing this work and trying to be a leader in this work, is that humility and curiosity are just essential qualities of effective equity leaders. No matter how much we know or how many assumptions we’ve unearthed and revised, or how much good work we have done, we will still hold spaces in our mental models and in our practices that contribute to inequity. This is true no matter what our race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion or ability statuses are. And so it behooves us, and the work, to be courageous not just in confronting and inequitable practices that we see in the system or in others, but also courageous and humble in holding up our own thoughts and practices for examination and critique.

This is where ongoing professional learning is essential – whether it’s through the two methods we outlined in the brief or through other mechanisms - we really have to be committed to really questioning our assumptions together and using what we discover when we ask the question “Who benefits and who does not” in order to change practice. We need to keep looking.

Host Erin Macey: Wonderful. Thank you so much.

Dr. Sharon Radd: It was great to be with you, Erin. Thank you.

Host Erin Macey: Great Lakes Equity Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this podcast were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.