Equity by Design:

Developing Critical Consciousness through Professional Learning

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Arguably, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has increased overall awareness of the "achievement gaps" that exist in and result from our current educational system. However, the "achievement gap" terminology and framing masks gaping disparities in opportunities and support to learn (Kumashiro, 2012), often leaving these larger inequities unnoticed (Kumashiro, 2012; Equity and Excellence Commission, 2013). In fact, gaps between children from high and low income families are much higher than they were in the past (Cuellar, as cited in Donald, 2013). In short, the "achievement gap" framing and rhetoric has done little to address systemic inequities, or to address what Ladson-Billings (2006) calls our "education debt" to historically marginalized students.

While dismayed by this situation, those familiar with critical theory might expect these continuing inequalities. Historically, critical theorists have been concerned with inequality deriving from economic structures; more recent advances in the theory draw our attention to the ways in which race, gender, language, religion, and ability operate to privilege some and disadvantage others. Today, critical theorists explore why "Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequality, racism, and class discrimination are empirical realities" (Brookfield, 2005, p. viii; see also Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). They argue that inequality is reproduced through a system of dominant beliefs and language that describes existing education and economic systems as fair, normal, natural, and right. While one may think that inequity should be plain to see, critical theorists argue that it is all around us and most often escapes notice (Apple, 1990; Brookfield, 2005; Kumashiro, 2012).

We argue that critical consciousness - or awareness of the beliefs and language that obscure systemic inequities - is a necessary precursor to enacting meaningful systemic transformation. Critical consciousness allows stakeholders to identify how and why underlying personal and institutional beliefs, assumptions, norms, and practices contribute to inequality, and interrupts a tendency to place undue blame on individuals in the system, be they students, parents or teachers. This brief explores the concept of critical consciousness and its centrality as a tool in professional learning as part of systemic reform efforts. It offers guidance to educators who are looking to develop critical consciousness by describing a critical approach to two common professional learning structures: reflection journals and communities of practice. The guidelines for each structure are intended to unearth the assumptions underlying the practices and procedures that lead to disparate opportunities to learn. Examining and reforming those underlying beliefs is a critical component in transforming practices and outcomes.

Key Terms

Critical Consciousness – An active state of seeking to identify the beliefs and language that obscure systemic inequities

Communities of Practice – Groups of individuals engaged in collective learning (Wegner, 2011)

Causal Assumptions – Beliefs about causes and their effects that often use an if-then logic

Prescriptive Assumptions – Beliefs about the way things should be and the way people should act, including acceptable modes of speech and action

Paradigmatic Assumptions – Deeply held beliefs or worldviews that frame the way we look at or understand

What is Critical Consciousness?

The meaning of the term *consciousness* varies depending on the audience, but for the purposes of this brief, we equate consciousness with awareness and knowledge. It is not a state of *being*, but an active state of thinking. Furthermore, taking a *critical* stance in this sense is not just to critique. *Critical* consciousness is an active and persistent curiosity and awareness that examines beliefs, practices, assumptions, and norms to detect how power and privilege operate to contribute to inequality and oppression (Freire, 2000). Simply put, rather than accepting "the way things are," we develop critical consciousness to see where systems and relations of power operate to oppress and then work to achieve liberation (Horton, 1988).

Critical consciousness is important because oppression often manifests itself through stories that we tell ourselves and others about what is natural, normal, or right – the "commonsense wisdom accepted by the majority…class, race, and culture" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 68). We call this the "dominant narrative." Brookfield (2005) explains that these narratives contain an "apparent obviousness" that gives them a "subtle seductiveness" and a "hidden power" (p. 68). The hidden power serves to maintain educational conditions that advantage some while disadvantaging others. Most often, this occurs beneath the surface of consciousness, and as a result, many individuals accept and promote the dominant narrative, sometimes without even realizing it (Apple, 1990; Kumashiro, 2012).

Disrupting educational conditions that advantage some while simultaneously disadvantaging others requires the careful scrutiny of the assumptions that undergird dominant narratives. To understand how assumptions work, we consider three kinds of assumptions (as identified by Brookfield, 2012):

Causal assumptions guide our understanding of how things work in the world and how they can be changed. These assumptions guide how we decide to act based upon prediction or previous experience. We are most able and willing to unearth, examine, and revise, these assumptions.

Prescriptive assumptions guide our thinking about what we think should happen in any given situation. They govern what we think are the acceptable ways to think and act. They stem from our paradigmatic assumptions.

Paradigmatic assumptions are deeply held and the most difficult to notice. Rather than acknowledging them as assumptions, we tend to think of these as fundamental truths, hold onto them very tightly, and usually refuse to revise them.

Critical theorists caution that any context and set of arrangements is complex, and thus argue against buying any set of assumptions wholesale (Apple, 1990; Kumashiro, 2012). Instead, critical consciousness invites us to examine that which we have previously not questioned because it is in the taken for granted that inequity thrives. We must more closely examine assumptions to understand where, how, and why they are accurate and plausible, and where, how, and why they are inaccurate and improbable. Reflection journals and critical communities of practice are two tools that help us to unearth, examine, and when needed, change, our assumptions and practices.

Toward Transformative Professional Learning

Transformative professional learning *must* have critical consciousness at its core. It must move beyond instrumental questions, such as "How do I achieve X?" and ask questions like, "Why do I think X is important?" and "Who benefits and who is disadvantaged by X?" Thus, our goal is to shift the dialogue, both within existing professional development structures as well as when creating new professional learning opportunities, to shine a spotlight on assumptions (Servage, 2008). This work can be "threatening, emotionally charged, and extremely difficult" (Mezirow, 1995), thus it is essential that we create ongoing and psychologically safe spaces in which to do it. In this brief, we offer a tool - reflection journals - for use in such spaces, and then we describe a model, called critical communities of practice, intended to serve as safe space for engaging in critical dialogues.

Reflection Journals or Blogs

Reflective journaling (Smyth, 1989) or blogging (Yang, 2009) can help us call into question the origin and nature of our teaching practices. An effective place to begin this practice is to consider those policies or practices that families, students, or colleagues have challenged either directly (e.g., through questioning) or indirectly (e.g., through resistance). Consider these questions related to common areas of educator practice that often lead to conflict and inequity:

Questions for Reflection

What do you say to students is the purpose of getting an education?

What is the reason students should do schoolwork or home-work?

What do you teach children about how to behave, and why?

What do students earn and lose points for in your gradebook or why?

What does it mean to be a strong or competent student in your classroom?

Do you allow students to re-take tests? Why or why not?

Then, pick a topic, and journal by following this set of prompts (Smyth, 1989):

Describe the practice: "What do I do?" Grounding the journal in concrete examples can help bring underlying tensions between beliefs and practices to the surface.

Interrogate the practice: "Why do I do this?" Or "What are the assumptions and values that inform my practice?" Look for causal (if…then), prescriptive (should), and paradigmatic (fundamental truths) assumptions.

Confront the narrative: "Who benefits from current, dominant theories and assumptions about why this practice is necessary?" When we interrogate our practices, we may uncover theories of teaching and learning that have their roots in deeply entrenched stories about teaching and learning (Smyth, 1989). If we aim to create equity, we have to ask ourselves if the messages and assumptions underlying our practices challenge the dominant narrative, or reinforce it.

Reconstruct the narrative: "How might I do things differently?" A journal is a safe space to reimagine practice and mentally test out new scenarios. A practitioner might write out predicted outcomes of new modes of practice, and then compare these to the outcomes once enacted.

Sample Journal Entry: What do students earn or lose points for in your gradebook?

Describe: *Typically, I tell students that they cannot earn an "A" on a late paper. Recently, a student who was having a difficult time because his parents were getting a divorce turned in a paper late. According to my rubric, the paper should have earned a "C" or lower. I felt uncomfortable giving him that grade in light of what was going on.*

Interrogate: *I dock points for late work because:*
   If I don't have a penalty, students will turn things in late all the time. (Causal)
   Students should follow the deadlines that I set because that shows respect and responsibility. (Prescriptive)
   Timeliness is important. (Paradigmatic)
   Timeliness is a sign of respect. (Paradigmatic)
   If students don't learn timeliness, they will not be successful in life. (Causal)
   Allowing some students to turn in late work is unfair to other students. (Paradigmatic)

Confront: *Is it true that without a penalty for lateness, students will turn things in late all the time? In the past, I have accepted late work from students with "good excuses" without any significant effect on their later timeliness or on anyone else's. Also, is the timeliness of work more important than the learning itself? In part, I am worried about my own workload: having everything turned in at a particular time works well for my schedule. Also, I question my notion that timeliness is important and a sign of respect. Wouldn't it be good if a student wanted more time to work on a project so that he or she could improve the quality of it? Plus, if the quality of the work is sufficient to earn an "A," why should time factor into the grade? Perhaps there should be a separate way to tell students about the impact of timeliness on my workload.*

Reconstruct: *What if I change my deadline policy to include some flexibility on due dates but with an ultimate end-of-semester deadline, and that any late work will need to be accompanied by a written explanation for the lateness? Better yet, maybe I can discuss with the class some of the reservations I have about changing the policy and have them help me to construct a new one that seems fair to everyone. I imagine that I will need some supports in place to ensure that some students do not wait to turn everything in at the last minute, and that I will need to clear space for myself to grade work throughout the semester rather than at designated times.*

This critical reflection enabled the writer to examine a practice that may have penalized particular students, ultimately resulting in the generation of new approaches to teaching and learning. From here, the writer may engage in some action research with a new practice, documenting the change process and its outcomes, or she may do some further investigation of alternative practices that disrupt traditional assumptions and how they are working in other environments. Reflection journals can also be linked to critical communities of practice, as described in the next section.

Critical Communities of Practice

Communities of practice, or groups of individuals engaged together in collective learning (Wenger, 2011), can be another powerful setting for regularly engaging critical consciousness. These can be connected to critical reflection journals or blogs, or not. Blogs, by their public nature, lend themselves to the creation of online communities of practice (Yang, 2009). But written journals, too, can be used as a touchpoint in relationships that promote critical consciousness. Whatever the stimulus or medium for the dialogue, the most important element is to engage in ongoing conversation about assumptions that contribute to inequities.

Inviting Others. In typical communities of practice, only educators at a particular grade level or in a particular cluster are invited to the table. Their perspectives can closely resemble one another, and are therefore not always the most useful for critically analyzing practice. Consider inviting students, family members, support staff, or other individuals with dissimilar roles to engage in critical analysis of practices.

Norms. Together, create some shared guidelines for engaging in critical inquiry with one another. The group might decide to try to balance warm (positive) and cool (critical) feedback, or that the role of listeners is to ask particular questions that guide reflection rather than to analyze or comment on practice.

Consider also some benchmarks for success. How will you know that the critical community of practice is achieving its stated goals? You may want to set up some timeframes and mechanisms for collecting feedback that answers the question, "How is this working?"

Practice Guidelines. Critical inquiry need not be formulaic, but it does need to address particular questions, including:

> What are the assumptions undergirding my practice?
>
> Who benefits and who is disadvantaged from these assumptions?
>
> What can I do differently to ensure that all students benefit?

These questions will guide the inquiry toward equity-related concerns and solutions.

> *Thinking critically requires us to check the assumptions that we, and others, hold, by assessing the accuracy & validity of the evidence for these and by looking at ideas and actions from multiple perspectives.*
>
> *Brookfield, 2012*

Excerpt from a Critical Conversation about Behavior Management Systems

Facilitator: *Today, we are planning to examine our behavior management systems. Let's start by describing some of the systems we currently have in place.*

Grade 2 Teacher: *I'll go first. In many of our classrooms, on our walls, we have a pocket with each student's name on it and a set of cards inside. Students start out the day on green, which is good. If they do something wrong, we have them pull out their green card. The next card is yellow. It means they are warned. If they get another card pulled, they are on orange, and I send a note home at the end of the day to their parents. If they get another card pulled, they are on red and they get detention.*

Facilitator: *Okay, what are some of the assumptions that motivated a system like this?*

Grade 4 Teacher: *Well, I feel like I need some way to visually show students when they misbehave, and to have some consequences for misbehavior.*

Facilitator: *So one assumption is that if there are negative consequences…*

Grade 2 Teacher: *…students will be afraid to misbehave.*

Facilitator: *So it sounds like you believe that fear is an effective and appropriate motivational tool for behavior. I also hear an assumption that students are afraid of having notes sent home and of detention. There might also be an assumption about what parents will do when they receive a note from the teacher…*

Grade 2 Teacher: *You know, I never really thought about it, but it is a system based almost entirely on fear.*

Parent: *I can share that my daughter is terrified of getting a yellow or orange. One day, I think she got a yellow for talking and she came home in tears.*

Facilitator: *So it seems as though the assumption that getting a yellow or orange card creates fear in students bears out for at least some students. What are the benefits and disadvantages of motivating students through fear? What other options might there be for motivating all students, including those who are not motivated by fear? What does research tell us about the effectiveness and impact of fear as a motivator?*

A critical community of practice like this one might go on to explore norms related to behavior and student motivation, to select some sources of data they might want to examine at a future meeting, or to imagine alternative possibilities for current practices. Again, the ultimate goal is to hold out assumptions for critical analysis, asking who benefits from current assumptions and how best to transform practices to better serve all students.

Conclusion

Systemic equity change requires deep and broad assessments of our current practices and systems to discern which of our current structures, processes, beliefs, and norms contribute to ongoing inequities. This work is messy, complicated, and hard! It takes will, courage, and humility to unearth and articulate the assumptions that underlie our practice and our system. It takes commitment and critical reflection to deeply analyze the role each of those elements plays in either maintaining the status quo or creating meaningful change for equity. Yet, without this critical examination of our thinking, our practice, and our systems, we are bound to stay stuck in technical and procedural shifts, rather than making transformative change for educational equity.

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Sharon Radd is Assistant Professor of Organizational Leadership at St Catherine University; she is also the Founder and Lead Consultant at Sankalpa Consulting. She specializes in the areas of educational equity, leadership, adult learning, organizational change and development, and communication, conflict and decision-making. Radd has over 20 years of experience in public education as a school administrator, professional development facilitator, and school social worker; her practice and research explore the complexities of public education as a transformative institution for social justice and equity, and the practice of leadership to create democratic, inclusive, and just communities. In 2006, Dr. Radd was awarded a Bush Leadership Fellowship and earned her Doctorate of Education in Leadership from the University of St. Thomas in 2007. In 2010, her study titled, "Connecting Private Roads to Public Highways: Toward a Theory of School Leadership for Social Justice" won the American Educational Research Association LSJ-SIG Social Justice Dissertation Award.

About the Great Lakes Equity Center

The mission of the Great Lakes Equity Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design series of practitioner briefs is intended to provide

vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequitycenter.org.

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