

## **The Role of Critical Reflection in Exploring Issues of Culture and Language**

Given the hidden but powerful role of culture in caregivers' interactions with children and families, it is important to prepare personnel who are able to critically examine their practices through a cultural lens (Delpit, 1995; Derman-Sparks & Brunson Phillips, 1997). Thus, it is our position that underlying all of the preservice and professional development recommended practices is a core practice, that of critical reflection (Miller, Ostrosky, Laumann, Thorp, Sánchez, & Fader-Dunne, 2003). Professional organizations, including the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), have recommended that personnel preparation programs prepare teacher candidates who are aware of the socio-cultural context of education, in particular the role of education in a democratic society and implications for ensuring equity and access for diverse young learners (Stayton, Miller, & Dinnebeil, 2003). They must also prepare students to consider the socio-historical influences on how disability is defined and how services for young children with disabilities are designed (Skrtic, 1995). These issues are equally important for the development of inservice professionals. For early care professionals to be able to consider these issues, inservice and preservice programs need to create contexts that enable them to embrace critical reflection so that they become better able to explore the cultural lens through which they view the world and to see how their cultural assumptions and experiences influence their interactions with children and families.

Brookfield (1987) suggests that two activities are central to critical thinking: (1) identifying and challenging assumptions and (2) exploring and imagining alternatives. He suggests, however, that embracing critical reflection can be an "almost Herculean act of will..." because, "If we are comfortable with our existence, ...we are imprisoned in our own histories and constrained by the inevitably narrow paradigms of thought and action we inhabit" (Brookfield, 1987, p. 91). Consider, then, that the majority of teachers are Caucasian Euro-Americans (Hamayan, 1990; Wald, 1996; Sleeter, 2001; Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna & Flippin, 2004). Although perhaps through no active choice of their own, they have benefited from the cultural messages of the dominant culture and the implicit associated privileges (McIntosh, 1989).

### ***Essential Components of Critical Reflection***

Several elements are central to providing support for practitioners in order for them to take on the task of critical reflection. These elements – acknowledging and embracing difficult issues; analyzing dilemmas for assumptions; considering the socio-cultural context of dilemmas; and exploring and imagining alternatives – are the components that make reflection "critical." Often training participants, and perhaps faculty alike, experience discomfort at the term "critical", mistaking it for negative criticism. For example, one group of students with whom we worked, when asked to use critical reflection to consider meanings conveyed as a hidden curriculum within a preschool project proposed by their classmates, registered a great deal of resistance and discomfort, indicating that they did not want to "criticize" their peers. It is essential that trainers and participants engage in dialogue that clearly differentiates criticism from critical reflection. In fact, it is our view that the absence of critical reflection results in more criticism, because preservice and inservice

teachers are more likely to fall back on blaming in the absence of a formal strategy for interpreting the personal meanings they associate with dilemmas.

***Acknowledge and embrace difficult issues.*** To authentically commit to infusing issues of culture and language into personnel preparation and professionals development requires embracing the fact that this will require orchestrating difficult discussions. Typically, the most difficult discussions will be around what many view to be taboo topics. Florio-Ruane (2001) suggests that “a major problem in teaching and teacher education is the difficulty educators have coming to terms with their own biases and perspectives,” (p.152) and that the taboo around discussing issues of race contributes to this. In many schools and programs, a key element of professional identity is the notion of “color-blindness”, linked to the notion of equal treatment for all children. While perhaps well-intentioned, this notion of color-blindness has led to silence about issues of race, thus perpetuating bias (Paley, 1979). Florio-Ruane challenges teacher educators to change the conversation that is occurring in teacher education from a posture of studying *about* culture to learning with others, thus transforming one’s view through dialogue. She says, “the knowledge teachers ‘need’ – in this case about culture or power or inequality – is ‘out there’ for the taking,” (p. 155). It merely requires “joyful” participation in difficult conversations.

One of the most fertile fields for these difficult conversations arises out of the experience of dilemmas or cultural discontinuities (Thorp & Sánchez, 1998). This view acknowledges that when early care providers interact across cultures, there are bound to be cultural conflicts and dilemmas. In order to engage in critical reflection, these dilemmas need to be consciously addressed – embraced as having the power to lead to learning and change. Too often, without a framework for critical reflection, preservice teachers, as well as practicing professionals, allow dilemmas to support existing stereotypes and, if anything, fix a negative view in consciousness. John Dewey, as early as 1933 (Dewey, 1933, as cited in Brookfield, 1987) saw perplexity and doubt, coupled with critical reflection, as the way in which individuals could make meaning and come to resolution. Incorporating the use of dilemmas as a tool for critical reflection requires that programs create a structure and process in which preservice and inservice professionals: (1) open their eyes to acknowledge dilemmas and stay in that state of discontinuity, rather than jumping to solutions; (2) describe dilemmas in ways that ensure that they see themselves at the center of the dilemma; (3) interpret personal and professional meanings of the dilemma through interpersonal dialogue and systematic problem solving (Thorp & Sánchez, 1998; Brookfield, 1987); and practice applying new understandings.

***Analyze dilemmas for underlying assumptions.*** It is not unusual that individuals think that their dilemmas are obvious dilemmas that would be shared by anyone who heard the facts of the dilemma. They do not immediately realize that dilemmas stem from interactions that challenge deeply held beliefs and values that are at once personal and, as well, culturally and contextually constructed (Brookfield, 1987). Analyzing dilemmas for underlying assumptions asks the learner to reflect on the following questions: (1) What meaning did this dilemma have for me? (2) Why was it a dilemma? (3) In what way did it challenge my deeply held values and assumptions? (4) What memories and early experiences did it trigger, and how might these help me understand the source of my assumptions? Applying these questions encourages professionals to analyze

experiences they identify as problems or dilemmas from the perspective of their cultural lens (Thorp & Sánchez, 1998).

**Consider the socio-cultural context of the actors in dilemmas.** This element of critical reflection, which requires perspective taking and structural analysis, asks the learner to leap across the cultural divide and consider how the dilemma was experienced from the point of view of one or more other participants who may bring a different cultural lens. For example, a participant in an inservice workshop describes the frustration she feels with a mother who always picks up her baby at the slightest whimper. The professional wonders how this mother can be so overprotective, how the baby will ever learn to calm himself, to self-regulate. This workshop participant must be supported to begin to wonder what beliefs and values may undergird the mother's behavior and how these behaviors have served the mother in her cultural context. Dialogue can begin when the inservice professional is able to recognize that there may be another culturally constructed vantage point different from her own (Darling-Hammond, 2002).

This process is challenging, requiring the learner to at least entertain the notion that there may be another way to engage in any number of child rearing routines or to interpret any number of events that occur in a child's day. It requires continued careful orchestration in order to avoid truncating the process, leaving the learner with an acknowledgment that there, indeed, may be other perspectives but that, "my way is still the right way." However, as challenging as is this process of supporting personal perspective taking, even more challenging is encouraging learners to engage in socio-cultural analysis of dilemmas, in wondering about social justice elements that may be embedded in the dilemma, about elements of institutional bias, of race, social class, power and privilege, and about how these are reflected in early care and education practices (Kidd, Sánchez & Thorp, 2004a; Darling-Hammond, 2002; Brookfield, 1987).

In early care and education these larger issues of social justice may lie in unpacking dilemmas around why particular families fail to participate (Thorp, 1997) or how particular early care professionals behave with children and families (Ballenger, 1999) or as Tatum (2000) describes it, "why all the black kids sit together in the cafeteria". The process is challenging for faculty who provide preservice and inservice training because, as Darling-Hammond notes, they must be prepared to support conversation in which, "some students would bear the brunt of explaining how injustices work from their own life experiences, and that others would struggle to find a way to become agents of social justice when they found that they had been beneficiaries in their lives of the system which produces so much educational injustice," (Darling-Hammond, 2002, p.3).

**Explore and imagine alternatives.** This element of critical reflection extends logically from perspective taking. The early care and education professional begins to recognize that there are other ways of behaving and that, from the perspective of others living in a different socio-cultural milieu, these other ways are completely logical and explicable. As Brookfield notes, the learner comes to realize that "every belief we hold, every behavior we cherish as normal, every social or economic arrangement we perceive as fixed and unalterable can be and is regarded by other people (in our own culture as well as in other cultures) as bizarre, inexplicable, and wholly irrational," (Brookfield, 1987). At this point, the learner is able to identify alternative ways to address the dilemma, at the

very least engaging in deeper dialogue with the actors in the dilemma whose behavior seemed inexplicable, perplexing and frustrating. At best, the learner is able to identify new ways of behaving in the dilemma.

Finally, in order to create safe environments for learners to engage in successful reflection, university faculty and professional development trainers may themselves need to go through their own cultural process and model critical reflection for students. Further, they will need to model a habit of wondering, themselves asking, “where are the migrant families? Whose voices are heard in this community? Why are some people invisible? Whose contributions are valued?” Their authenticity and their ability to embrace perplexity creates a safe place for reflection and dialogue (Brookfield, 1987; Florio-Ruane, 2001).

### ***Facilitated Discussion on Controversial Issues***

Embracing discussion of difficult issues requires instructors to address their own assumptions and values. Most importantly, it requires them to choreograph the discussion. Choreographing the discussion involves identifying key resources or readings that will engage the learners and then posing questions that will challenge assumptions and facilitate new interpretations. Choreographing also implies anticipating where pitfalls might occur, when there might be silence that is masking fear, and when there might be confrontation. One example is the use of *An unlikely friendship* (Bloom, 2002) with a mixed group of African Americans and Caucasians. The video shows the development of an unlikely friendship between an African American community organizer and a white leader of the Ku Klux Klan. The instructor must be prepared for the very different responses that may come from participants based on their own prior experience. The instructor must also be mindful of the timing of the use of this activity, because honest discussion will require trust among group members.

### ***Use of Dialogue to Support Critical Reflection***

Dialogue creates opportunities for individuals to learn from another person’s perspective and to also see themselves through the lens of another. Productive dialogue also requires careful choreographing and asks the instructor to carefully consider the kinds of questions that will enhance the probability that meaningful dialogue will occur.

***Structured dialogue.*** Structured dialogue, with pairs or small groups, is a technique that can be used to help learners explore issues or problem solve around a instructor-posed questions, dilemmas, or critical incidents. While this approach can be time consuming, it results in higher level learning and enables the instructor a greater window on how issues related to culture and language are being interpreted by individual participants.

***Interactive dialogue journals.*** Another form of dialogue takes place in journals. Learners can be asked to maintain a reflective journal in which they note events that have occurred in a university class or workshop session, in a field experience, in their practice with children and families, or in their routine interactions with friends, co-workers, and family members. The reflection comes when learners are asked to explore the meaning of these experiences and what they have to do with beliefs, values, assumptions and biases. Interactive dialogue journals enable preservice and inservice and individual instructors to engage in more intimate dialogue around issues that learners may not feel ready to

introduce into public classroom discourse (Staton, 1987). In turn, instructors can offer challenges and pose questions at a deeper level. The use of journaling may take different forms with preservice and inservice learners. Whereas journaling can take place on an ongoing basis with preservice students over the course of a semester or longer, journaling for inservice groups may take the form of exchanges that occur on-line, overnight, or as periodic check-ins. The timing of journaling assignments needs to match instructional intent.

Talking about the need to address diversity as the educational challenge of the 21st century is easy, but to effect change in teacher education programs, preservice and inservice faculty, learners, and their practices necessitates that trainers and learners commit to a deeper, longer term, more painful process of critical reflection and continuous dialogic interaction with diverse cultural communities. The work can not simply involve creating new courses or providing inservice training on “cultural competence”, but rather must begin with self-reflection. Further, there is new content to be learned by trainers as well as by learners. The issues of culture and language are complex and are related to all of us, not just to new immigrants or those who speak languages other than English. Thus, partnerships with diverse communities, families, and professionals are essential. As instructors of teachers of the 21st century, the potential is within us to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to transform program to be more culturally and linguistically responsive and to welcome and nurture all children.

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