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# Looking Within: Teacher Critical Self-Reflection on Language and Cultural Integration in Multilingual Schools

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## **Objectives or purposes**

The purpose of this case study was to further delineate a framework of critical reflection (Genor, 2005) by exploring and defining patterns and levels of critical reflection (as well as teacher growth and development related to these levels) that in-service content area teachers experience as they learn to become more effective practitioners with culturally and linguistically diverse students. More specifically, by examining ways in which teachers enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) courses at a Mid-Western University, Butler University, came to question their beliefs underlying teaching and learning through the process of structured critical self-reflection infused across the curricula, the researchers hoped to gain insights into the following: 1) The extent to which white middle class teachers were willing to question their socially constructed views of reality, and in so doing, were better able to understand the ways that their beliefs, interpersonal relations and instructional interactions impacted their EL students, 2) The depth of critical reflection these teachers were able to achieve and 3) What teacher patterns of reflection within and across various levels of reflection looked like.

## **Perspective(s) or theoretical framework**

In a summary and analysis of critical reflection frameworks in education, Genor (2005) concluded that conceptions of critical reflection still remain somewhat vague and difficult to measure, and that there exists a need for frameworks that better attend to the complexities of teaching and, in particular, recognize or emphasize teacher growth and development within various reflective levels. Genor (2005) proposed a framework for teacher reflection that included three stages of reflection: 1) *Unproblematized Reflection* in which teachers engage in inquiries into teaching and learning in very general or abstract ways without deeply examining or problematizing questions or issues raised in the inquiry process, 2) *Problematized Reflection* in which teachers question their existing beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning in light of new understandings or insights prompted by examining relevant sociocultural and sociopolitical factors, and 3) *Critically Problematized Reflection* in which the problematizing of current understandings about teaching and learning in light of relevant sociocultural and sociopolitical factors prompts a profound change in beliefs among teachers that leads to radically different educational practices. However, in a study of 8 preservice teachers engaged in collaborative inquiry twice a month over the course of a semester, Genor (2005) found very few examples of problematized reflection among teachers and no representations of critically problematized reflection.

## **Methods**

Coursework and artifacts were initially analyzed and coded through an etic perspective in light of Genor's (2005) proposed critical reflection framework levels. Data were then analyzed and coded from an emic perspective to identify preliminary categories relating to teachers' meaning schemes and stages in the reflection process. After establishing provisional data categories, initial codes were re-examined and refined as data analysis continued and themes were identified (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Coursework and artifacts were reanalyzed to augment the themes with stronger participant voice in order to saturate each category with supporting data as well as to investigate emerging themes that were not previously identified by Genor (2005).

The researchers enhanced the trustworthiness of the data analysis by 1) triangulating the data using multiple types of course documents and artifacts as data sources, 2) employing a member checking process by seeking feedback on emerging themes from current and/or former project participants, 3) drawing upon the work of teachers from 7 different school districts, and 3) debriefing with colleagues the emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002).

## **Data sources**

The data used to explore the research questions came from reflections on discussion of teacher and student work, participant critical self-reflection journals, end of course feedback, emails from participants, and artifacts from course activities such as written comments at the end of class and documents that the participants created as they explored key course concepts.

## **Results**

Analysis of the critical reflection journals produced important insights into the experiences of teachers who engaged in critical self-reflection regarding their professional practices with EL students within their classrooms, schools, and communities. Teachers demonstrated different levels of engagement in critical self-reflection regarding their instruction and interaction with EL students: unproblematized reflection, problematized reflection, and critically problematized reflection.

Despite the extended opportunities to engage in critical self-reflection through discussion and writing, a small core of teachers persisted in espousing that they had no assumptions or biases. Genor (2005) would characterize these teachers as engaging in unproblematized reflection. These teachers fell into two camps: one camp that saw EL students' languages and cultures as a threat to the community and another camp that

saw EL students' native languages as a handicap that would keep them from fully engaging in the community and larger society. The resulting instructional practices for these two groups were similar. Neither group integrated the languages and cultures of EL students into their curriculum and instruction. The camp that saw diverse languages and cultures as a threat believed that it was the EL students' responsibility to assimilate to the teacher's language, culture, and instructional practices. The camp that saw language and cultural diversity as a handicap believed that the more time that students spend in English and the American culture, the faster they would "become fully contributing members to the society."

A much larger group of teachers engaged in what Genor (2005) described as problematized reflection. These teachers were willing to challenge their assumptions about teaching EL students and question the effectiveness of their current instructional practices. They typically viewed language and cultural integration into their curriculum and instruction as a transitional allowance. Two perspectives of EL students' languages and cultures emerged from this group: 1) native language is important for social purposes because it helps EL students to feel valued and accepted within the school community, and 2) the native languages and cultures of students are an important instructional bridge until students become fully proficient in English and assimilate into "American society." Teachers at this level of problematized reflection often wrote that they wanted to make changes in their instructional practices in terms of language and cultural integration, but they were unsure of how they could successfully accomplish this feat. They did not have a strong sense of self-efficacy for providing culturally and linguistically responsive instruction.

A small group of teachers in the study engaged in what Genor (2005) called critically problematized reflection. These teachers readily admitted their assumptions and biases and explained how they made changes to their professional practices as a result of their new understandings. One of the salient themes that emerged from this group of teachers was that they were making strong, conscious connections between theory, research, and practice. Within this group of teachers who engaged in critically problematized reflection, some teachers expressed a view of the languages and cultures of their EL students as personal assets for the students. Other teachers conceptualized these languages and cultures as both personal and learning community assets. They viewed the cultural and language diversity of their EL students as an instructional asset for all learners in the class and they expanded their view of the American culture to include the languages, cultures, and experiences of different ethnic and racial groups. They held a strong sense of efficacy in their abilities to integrate the languages, cultures, and experiences of their EL students into their curriculum and instruction.

Findings further brought to light common levels and patterns of reflection within the aforementioned stages initially outlined by Genor (2005). Themes of native language and cultural integration appeared

throughout teachers' discourse and were key areas in which varying levels of changes in teachers' beliefs and professional practices emerged. Moreover, important factors which appeared to influence the extent to which teachers were able to overcome deficit perspectives and develop more culturally and linguistically responsive beliefs and practices included teachers' (1) capacity to identify one's biases and assumptions, (2) perceived purposes for incorporating students' native languages and cultures in instruction, (3) levels of self-efficacy, and (4) a willingness to break through one's cultural encapsulation to implement more culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices.

### **Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work**

With current criticisms calling into question the effectiveness of teacher education, it is imperative to demonstrate how teacher education programs, continuing education programs, and professional development can be essential change agents in helping educators develop their professional practices and be more responsive to the languages, cultures, and experiences that EL students bring with them to school. Effective teachers of EL students understand and address the academic, cognitive, linguistic, and socio-cultural factors impacting the success in school of these students (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Unfortunately, most teacher education programs spend little time addressing effective instruction and teacher assumptions regarding EL students (Vavrus, 2002).

The findings of this study extend the framework and research of Genor (2005) who found that few teachers in her study demonstrated problematized reflection and no teachers demonstrated critically problematized reflection. The current study, which included more teachers and a longer period of time than Genor's study, found that when teachers were challenged systematically and across multiple courses, most teachers demonstrated levels of problematized and critically problematized reflection. Findings suggest that some teachers examine and change their underlying beliefs and professional practices regarding culturally and/or linguistically diverse students.

Graduate teacher education programs can create a context in which inservice teachers question their beliefs and professional practices with EL students and disrupt the idea that content area teachers are not responsible for integrating EL students' languages and cultures into their curriculum and instruction. The process of critical self-reflection serves as a catalyst for encouraging teachers to question the assumptions underlying their professional practices. Unfortunately, according to Gorski (2009), most teacher education programs address cultural and linguistic diversity issues at a superficial level. Even at the basic level of teacher preparation, most preservice teachers are not experiencing cultural integration and teaching methodologies that influence changes in their beliefs regarding EL students.

At the level of graduate teacher education, there is very little research or discussion regarding changing inservice content area teachers' beliefs and professional practices with EL students. Consequently, most preservice teachers are not being prepared for culturally and linguistic classrooms, nor are most inservice teachers who work with EL students developing the capacities to provide research-based professional practice for serving these students.

Critical self-reflection as a foundational element in graduate teacher education programs is a necessary element in supporting inservice teachers in teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. As demonstrated in this study, the levels of critical reflection teachers are able to achieve can play a major role in impacting their teaching practices and responsiveness to the diverse characteristics of their students. Moreover, these levels appear to be influenced by factors including teachers' deeply held beliefs and their levels of self-efficacy. As such, it is incumbent upon teacher education programs and researchers to continue to focus on developing models and contexts for professional development that guides teachers in engaging in systematic critical reflection. Teachers must be given opportunities to bridge the theory to practice divide, thereby creating truly supportive contexts for the transformation of beliefs and professional practices.

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