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## Critical Awareness for Literacy Teachers and Educators in Troubling Times

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### **Critical Awareness for Literacy Teachers and Educators in Troubling Times**

Increasingly, research focuses on teachers' ability to use culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy to respond to the diverse needs of learners (e.g., Cruz, Ellerbrock, Vásquez, & Howes, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Lehtomaki, Janhonen-Abreuquah, & Kahangwa, 2017; Li, 2017; Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Yet, teacher unpreparedness continues to present an obstacle for addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students (Durgunoğlu & Hughes, 2010; Gay, 2014; Li, 2017; International Literacy Association, 2020; see also Risko et al., 2017). The continued indication of teacher unpreparedness may be attributed to “standardized curricula and pedagogy [that] have supplanted ... approaches [to diversity], marginalizing them in the greater educational discourse as neoliberal reforms have risen” (Aronson & Laughter, 2016, p. 164). There is also a likelihood that observations about teacher unpreparedness may be related to the absence of a body of evidence, which links culturally and linguistically responsive practices to student outcomes in classrooms (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Sleeter, 2012).

This focus on teacher (un)preparedness to address students' various languages and cultures is admittedly part of a paradigm shift in literacy studies. In earlier years, cognitivist approaches to literacy often emphasized the mind's processing of information (e.g., see Alexander & Fox, 2004; Smith, 1979). More

recently within the past few decades, sociocultural approaches to literacy research “emphasize the central role of social interaction in the development of knowledge and learning” (Au, 1998; Tracey & Morrow, 2012, p. 116). In keeping with this shift, the field of literacy has transitioned, *more so in scholarship than in teaching*, from focusing on an autonomous model of reading to an ideological model of literacy (Street, 2000). The autonomous model of reading/literacy suggests literacy practices can autonomously -- without the cultural factors in which they are situated -- have an effect on other social and cognitive practices. In contrast, the ideological model of literacy describes how literate practices are enacted and emerge based on contested social factors, which themselves are influenced by political, economic, and social ideologies, are culturally mediated, and in constant flux (see Street, 2000).

Notwithstanding this shift, transitions highlighting the role of multiple literacies based on an ideological perspective as opposed to reading or literacy based on an autonomous model (see New London Group, 2006), are yet to be reflected fully in the literacy instruction and assessment of students in U.S. schools. Instead, much of the instruction and assessment process remains largely governed by monolingual and monocultural approaches to literacy and their corresponding curricular standards, which focus largely on high-stakes testing and standardized English literacy norms (e.g., Bauer, 1998; Smith, 2016, 2017). Despite increasing research that highlights the varied literate cultures, “funds of knowledge” (Moll,

Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992), migrant identities, race, voices, multiliteracies, invisible literacies and languages of youth as legitimate assets to be advocated for in literacy classrooms (see Dyson, 2015; Heath, 1983; Skerrett, 2012; Watson & Knight-Manuel, 2017; Willis, 2017), we continue to see literacy instruction and assessment practices that do not honor these assets. In fact, such practices remain touted as the primary avenues through which to determine if and how the vast majority of youth will advance through an educational system arguably situated within high-stakes testing environments and their accompanying political acts, all of which unduly shape interpretations of literacy instruction and assessment (Dennis, 2013; Willis & Harris, 2000). The result – CLDs’ instruction and assessment continue to be enacted while overlooking the diversity students bring to mainstream literacy classrooms. At the same time, elements such as English *academic language* (which Flores, 2019 invites us to view instead as “language architecture”) and corresponding ‘academic literacies,’ remain privileged (see Brooks, 2016; Dennis, 2008; Morrell, 2002; Skerrett, 2009).

This discrepancy between an increasing body of literacy *research* that honors the diversity in students’ practices juxtaposed against a persistent system of schooling and high-stakes assessment that has not been designed to draw from underrepresented students’ literate assets, creates a situation where teachers (both pre- and in-service) often receive well-intentioned instruction from literacy teacher educators about how to instruct and address students’ according to diverse literacy

needs, but then, struggle to enact this instruction in the high-stakes testing environment of classrooms and schools where they have little autonomy. Stewart (2019) recently reminded us of this “two-worlds pitfall” (Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1985) -- “contradictions between standardized instructional practices often modeled by cooperating teachers” in K-12 schools and the “student-centered theories that [prospective and practicing teachers] have studied in their literacy [university] classrooms” (Stewart, 2019, p. 212).

It is from the contradictions surrounding literacy instruction and assessment inherent in such a dynamic that we decided to write this essay. Through this essay, we acknowledge the persisting challenge to create change with responsiveness. We thus make the clarion call for responsiveness to diversity in literacy, which extends beyond interactions with the "Other," and is steeped in interactions with the self. This interaction with self, which we propose through a simultaneous focus on critical awareness of race, language and culture, can be central to literacy teachers and educators, whose propensity to address diversity in relation to the "Other" has not yielded, as yet, the transformation we have hoped to see in classrooms.

## Consciously Addressing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Literacy Classrooms

“We are determined to ensure that our rich diversity, which is our collective strength, will be used for constructive partnership for change...”

(Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, 2002, Article 16)

As observed earlier, the field of literacy has increasingly attempted to consciously address cultural and linguistic diversity in classrooms. Globally, since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been very large movements of people from diverse backgrounds to urban centers (Hollins & Torres-Guzman, 2005). Such movements have continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century unabated, creating large urban meeting points, referred to by Vertovec (2007) as “super diversity.” These super diverse spaces are melting pots of different cultures and languages, requiring students, especially new migrants, not only to adapt to the differences among themselves but also to the differences between them and the existing inhabitants of the space that they now share. On the other hand, those who have had to make accommodations to facilitate the "Other" must also be willing to themselves adjust to embrace the diversities their new neighbors bring with them. In effect, all persons occupying this super diverse space must be willing to make some changes in order to capitalize on the rich diversity referenced in the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable

Development as potentially central to a strong and constructive partnership (UNESCO, 2002).

With schools being a subset of society, it is reasonable to expect this diversity will also be reflected in the classroom. In the classroom, students, many of whom are immigrants, often find themselves in a context referred to by Hollins and Torres-Guzman (2005) as culturally and linguistically complex environments (classrooms serving multiple cultural and linguistic groups) where teachers and educators are often underprepared to meet the learning needs of such diverse groups. This environment of inadequate support tends to contribute to outcomes such as low academic achievement, high dropout rates, and low college graduation rates.

We are not prepared to assume this inadequate support is deliberate, and merely a show by teachers who remain unwelcoming to students who are not of the mainstream culture. Quite often rather, we believe, it is more a case of teachers not having the requisite cultural and linguistic knowledge. Athanases, Banes, Wong and Martinez (2019) present the case, for example, of how many teachers assume one academic English is what is required for learning even though there is sufficient evidence to show that embracing a more broad-based usage of English (with different linguistic resources) supports discovery, meaning making, academic tasks and knowledge of linguistic diversity. Similarly, Civitillo, Juang and Schachner

(2018) posit teacher beliefs are often rooted in mainstream society where they reject the cultural capital students bring to the classroom.

We believe this limited and persistent cultural and linguistic knowledge of teachers and their misplaced belief system that inadvertently minimizes CLDs, is associated with a lack of awareness of the self, necessary to address issues such as multiculturalism and multilingualism in literacy classrooms. Fives and Buehl (2012) link this awareness of self to cultural self-efficacy, that is, efficacy related to cultural diversity where teachers and educators believe they can make a positive difference through culturally responsive teaching. Scholars such as Civitillo, Juang and Schachner (2018) indicate it is imperative that the issue of disconnect between educators and the "Other" in classrooms be handled early on in teachers' careers before it becomes a major impediment to responsive instruction.

Through training, Civitillo et al. (2018) have highlighted how teachers can enhance their responsiveness. We concur, and believe training should be aimed at exploring and challenging beliefs about cultural diversity among educators where careful attention is paid to the nature of the training, extending the length of sensitization courses, moving beyond standalone courses to integrating major themes across all courses in teacher education programs, and moving away from optional offerings of such courses. We are, however, mindful of the caveat by Civitillo et al. (2018) who point out that though there are many studies citing success when such training is provided, these studies tend to be based on the results



of cross-sectional designs. Thus, there is a clear need to determine the lasting effect of training for teachers, via longitudinal research studies where evidence is gathered about the effectiveness of the training in promoting sustained positive changes relating to CLD. This, we acknowledge, is useful in helping the field to determine how to promote acceptance of cultural diversity in classroom.

Like Civitillo et al. (2018), we see the period of teacher preparation in which numerous literacy educators engage with teachers as an opportunity and an ideal time to tackle beliefs about and knowledge of CLDs, as it is during this time, there is most likely to be change (Civitillo, Juang & Schachner, 2018). Teacher education, as argued by Civitillo et al. (2018), is the major vehicle to raise teachers' awareness of CLD to the point where they can acknowledge and challenge their knowledge and belief system and be responsive to the varying needs in the classroom. Engrained in this notion, we believe that while it is important for pre-service teachers to be aware of how to address diversity in their classrooms and how they can use this consciousness to unleash the power of instruction, it is equally important for in-service literacy teachers as well as literacy educators, to also possess an awareness of the self. This is especially true for literacy educators, many of whom remain monolingual and white, if they are to support this development of awareness in pre-service and in-service teachers. So, what does such awareness that engages the self, entail?

### Consciously Addressing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity with Self

We argue here that the field of literacy is in a position where literacy teachers and educators can all benefit from engaging more closely with the self as a basis for addressing cultural and linguistic diversity with the "Other". Based on emerging insights in the field and given our previous research, there is evidence that multilingual, multicultural, critical multilingual and critical multicultural awareness can foster this awareness of the self. *Multilingual awareness* refers to a knowledge of the subject-matter of the language an educator uses to support literacy, social and pragmatic norms, and to the teacher's ability to create opportunities for learning language through literacy in the classroom (García, 2015). And *multicultural awareness* represents a person's ability to note predispositions such as biased views, tendency to adopt a worldview that incorporates varying perspectives, and knowledge about people and events unfamiliar to them (see Nieto, 2000).

There is also now a recognition that simply being aware, though necessary, may not be sufficient. The greater call is to move the heightened sensibilities of teachers to a point of *critical* multilingual (García, 2015; Roxas et al., 2015) and *critical* multicultural awareness (Roxas, Dade, & Rios, 2017). Teachers and educators who possess critical multilingual and multicultural awareness will be compelled to move to action where they for example move past romanticizing and

studying the other. They will identify the norms that reinforce or challenge various forms of oppression and their role in contributing or deconstructing these norms (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Roxas et al., 2017).

Critical multilingual and multicultural awareness necessitates a reflection of the individual on the self (see Jessner, 2006 on "metalinguistic consciousness") and has been shown to be crucial for cultivating within the self, as literacy teachers and educators, the responsiveness to CLDs we seek, as a field, in practice (e.g., García, 2008; Jessner, 2006; Karadeniz & Incirci, 2016; Nieto, 2000; Razfar & Rumenapp, 2012; Smith, 2016, 2018, 2020; Smith et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2020). Through such critical awareness, literacy teachers and educators can use reflection on the self to transform their capacity for responsiveness in literacy, and to enable literacy teachers to do so.

Beyond the above, given the history of racial tension in the United States, we propose here, there must be a shift, also, beyond generic depictions of diversity that foreground language and culture, to an explicit and simultaneous focus on race and how it too, undergirds engagement with linguistic and cultural diversity in literacy (teacher) education (Haddix, 2017; Willis, 2017). What we envision in literacy research, teaching and assessment, then, is an explicit focus on *critical racial awareness* (Tanghe, 2016), operating in conjunction with *critical multilingual* and *critical multicultural awareness*, allowing literacy teachers and educators to revisit how race positions multiple and intersecting elements of the

self as a precursor for responsiveness. Such a focus will allow for closer attention to the role of race in language and culture when enacting literacy responsiveness (Louis, Michel, Deranek, & Louis, 2017; McMillon & Rogers, 2019).

A focus on *critical racial awareness*, when considered in conjunction with *critical multilingual* and *multicultural awareness*, can raise questions about how we leverage standards (e.g., International Literacy Standards), programs, courses, as well as the literacy curricula and assessment encountered by teachers and administrators in K-12 schools. What then, does it look like for teachers (preservice and in-service) as well as educators to arrive at the critical point of awareness where they are moved to responsiveness based on the intersection of race, culture and language?

### **Critical Linguistic, Racial and Cultural Awareness for Literacy Educators**

In previous scholarship, we have drawn from the multicultural and multilingual education scholarship (Garcia, 2009, 2015; Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Nieto, 2000), outlining conceptual frames to be considered as we help literacy educators arrive at a point of cultural and linguistic awareness (Smith, 2016, 2020). We have shown, also, how cultural and linguistic responsiveness in literacy classrooms develops as a function of critical multilingual and critical multicultural awareness (Smith et al., 2020). We have demonstrated that even racialized and linguicized literacy

educators and teachers whose raciolinguicized subjectivities are critical to redefining teacher education (Daniels & Varghese, 2020), can potentially and inadvertently overlook how their predispositions towards thinking about race, language and culture intersect, causing them to leverage responsiveness that is not always aligned with the needs of the "Other" in classrooms (see Smith, 2018, Smith, Warrican & Alleyne, 2020).

In turn, we envisage that literacy teachers and educators, as they enter classrooms and relate to the "Other", will begin to foreground critical *awareness* as a basis for developing *responsiveness*. Why? Because we believe it is possible that responsiveness may be undertaken with insufficient work on the self, thereby potentially obstructing impact in classrooms. We imagine literacy teachers and educators becoming so self-aware that they develop a critical edge in their personal ways of being, knowing, doing and living together with others, which inevitably leads them to the action we hope to see in classrooms (i.e., responsiveness; see Smith, 2018). Critical multicultural, critical multilingual awareness and critical racial awareness, as mentioned before, when leveraged simultaneously, should enable literacy teachers and educators not merely to adjust their approach to teaching diverse groups but to also actively seek to change their own lives as a precursor to, as well as through, actions such as advocacy. Such critical awareness allows teachers and educators to connect with the self and exude care and caring so the focus on the body and how it feels when interacting with the "Other" while they

also focus on learning that engages the mind (Smith, 2018) is not merely performative but a continuously transformative process.

### **Developing Critical Awareness for Responsiveness in Troubling Times**

In this brief essay, we have highlighted the need for critical multilingual, critical racial, and critical multicultural awareness that enables literacy teachers and educators to engage more closely with the self as a basis for arriving at a more potent impact with responsiveness to CLDs in literacy practice. In the midst of continued ongoing racial crises, both within our nation and across the globe, a situation further exacerbated by COVID-19, we urge literacy practitioners to consider this modest discussion about critical awareness and its emphasis on the self. We invite educators to reflect and to explore more closely how the self plays a role in systemic racial disparities often undergirding racial linguistic, and cultural barriers that have for so long persisted and significantly obstructed literacy opportunities for CLDs (e.g., Rosa & Flores, 2017; Willis, 2017). Critical multilingual, multicultural, and racial awareness can serve as a vehicle that makes more impactful our responsiveness in literacy and functions as a catalyst for change.

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