

What is Critical Reflective Practice?

Examining practical and procedural concerns along with students' demographic data, there is clear support for the OHRC's claim that certain students are streamed into special education "based on stereotypical assumptions about their capabilities due to their identification with the *Code* grounds of disability and race" (OHRC, 2018, 4.4. para. 4). In response, several rights and advocacy organizations, including the OHRC, have identified biases such as racism, classism, and ableism as factors potentially shaping special education identification and placement decisions. As such, critical reflective practice can help educators identify and dismantle classroom- and school-based barriers that disproportionately and negatively affect students believed to have an impairment impacting their learning. Critical reflective practice can offer educators tools to help guide them through classroom assessment, referral, identification, and placement decisions, as well as negate the overrepresentation of historically marginalized students in special education.

For those in leadership positions, integrating several ethical approaches to decision-making is recommended. When making decisions related to education programming and placement, considering the ethics of care, justice, critique, and profession (see Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016), as well as ethics of community (see Furman, 2004), is important. Lynch (2016) describes,

- the ethic of care and urges "school leaders to show care, concern, and connection with stakeholders in solving moral dilemmas" (para. 4).
- the ethic of justice as integrating the understanding of current laws, policies, and rights into decision making.
- the ethic of critique as reflecting on issues of power and inequities experienced by members of the school community.

Furman (2004) also advocates the ethic of community which privileges the communal (as opposed to the individual) in moral decisions around schooling. Each component of this ethical framework requires consideration when making decisions based on students' ability and about referrals, programming, and placement in special education.

Thinking through Systems: Critical Reflective Practice and Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy

Critical reflective practice requires educators to position themselves as learners in the service of students. This disposition means that educators are always critically thinking and rethinking their own positionality and identity along with their practice and pedagogy to determine the best possible way to support the learning of all students. Educational practice serves as the true catalyst to achievement, and critical educators must resist bias in relation to student abilities, labels, and social identities. Critical reflective practice is also strongly anchored in the core philosophical belief that all young people can develop skills and demonstrate achievement. Therefore, critical reflective practice challenges a deficit understanding of ability. In Ontario, critical reflective practice often adopts strategies such as Differentiated Instruction and Universal Design for Learning. However, there is a need to further integrate anti-bias and anti-oppressive practices steeped in culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy to address inequitable student outcomes.

Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy is the intentional action of merging *who* the student is with, *who* the educator is, and *how* educators choose to teach. Culture is a broadly defined term that may include many of the protected identities articulated in the *Code*. It is a term that represents commonality and may be situated in shared histories, experiences, religious beliefs, racial identities, place of origin, and so on (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2014; Muhammad, 2020). Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) embodies three well-documented tenets: academic success/high expectations, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2014). Academic success requires a rigorous curriculum for all students with the expectation of increased academic achievement. As culture is not static, cultural competence requires educators to use a child's cultural knowledge and practices, from an asset-based lens, as the primary vehicle for learning. This means that the student's lived realities are the fertile ground for learning. Critical consciousness provides students the opportunity to build awareness and critique the world around them. Critical consciousness also enables students to actively understand, engage, and critique their own social location (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2014). "All instruction is culturally responsive. The question is: to which culture is it currently oriented" (Ladson-Billings as cited in Kaul, 2019, para. 2).

The intentional merging of a critically reflective practice with a CRT approach increases the achievement of all students and is an expectation clearly articulated in the front matter of all Ontario curriculum documents:

[A]ll students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, so that they can feel engaged in and

empowered by their learning experiences...[It] affirms the worth of all students, and helps students strengthen their sense of identity and develop a positive self-image. It encourages staff and students alike to value and show respect for diversity in the school and the broader society. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 77)

CRT is particularly important when it comes to developing and implementing assessments and measures of student learning. However, reflection alone, critical or not, is insufficient to bring about structural change. For instance, critical reflective practice must be rooted in anti-bias, anti-oppressive practice. This means that we must couple critical reflective practice with a commitment to transformative practice through action.