

Critical Reflective Practice Guide – Shortened Educator Guide

Critical reflective practice can help educators identify and dismantle classroom- and school-based barriers that disproportionately and negatively affect marginalized students believed to have an impairment impacting their learning. It does this by offering educators tools to help guide them through classroom assessment, referral, identification, and placement decisions. Many of the lessons of critical reflective practice can be integrated into leadership decisions as well, helping to promote a school environment that is more just and caring ([See Shortened Leadership Guide on front page](#)).

Critical Reflective Practice and Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy

Critical reflective practice requires educators to position themselves as learners in service of students. This disposition means that educators must always think critically about their own positionality and identity along with their practice and pedagogy to determine the best possible way to support the learning of all students. This type of practice is also strongly anchored in the core philosophical belief that all young people can develop skills and demonstrate achievement.

In Ontario, critical reflective practice often adopts strategies such as Differentiated Instruction and Universal Design for Learning. However, there is a need to incorporate culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy into these strategies as well. 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. *Cultural competence* requires educators to use a child's cultural knowledge and practices as the primary vehicle for learning – meaning that a student's lived realities are fertile ground for learning. Finally, *critical consciousness* provides students the opportunity to build awareness and critique the world around them. It also enables students to actively understand, engage, and critique their own social location (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2014). CRT is particularly important when it comes to developing and implementing assessments and measures of student learning. It is important that CRT be used with other anti-bias/anti-oppressive practices and be paired with a commitment to action through transformational practice. The following sections examine some specific experiences of particular groups in various aspects of the education system.

The Early Years

The early years are different from school age programming because they are part of a range of settings and systems, including social services, health, education, and community programs, and they serve children alongside their families. In the early years, families are served by many programs alongside their children. This is very

different from family engagement or consultation for children of school age (K–12), where the program purpose is driven by curriculum and school-led goals.

Families experience many demands on their time and resources, including the work and courage it takes to engage in relationships with educators who may not hold the same cultural viewpoints. Educators can support families by ensuring that families are seen as decision-makers, while neither expecting nor demanding their participation.

Specific Guidance/Strategies for Educators:

- *Consider families as experts and partners in their children’s development.* Learn about how families understand disability, the other programs and service they have already engaged, previous recommendations they may have gotten, and any concerns they have about previous recommendations /assessments they have received. Learn about diversity in child parenting practices.
- *Critically review screening strategies and their implications.* Review the screening used in your practice and reflect on the criteria (e.g. for “success” or “readiness”) they use and the values they promote. Are they accessible to and reflective of all the children in your class/school? How are screenings being used?

Questions for Reflection:

- Which developmental milestones are privileged in your practice?
- How are developmental milestones tracked and measured in the classroom? What type of developmental approach do they support and do developmental principles align with those of your students’ families?
- What tools might you need to be able to provide differentiated instruction?
- What might be the implications of screening outcomes?

Core Tenets of Inclusive Instruction across K–12 Classrooms

Effective instructional practices by classroom educators are key to ensuring success for all students. However, these practices are influenced by an educator’s conception of student “ability” and how it is perceived alongside race, class, disability, gender, sexuality, and other identities. Marginalized students are often perceived as ‘low ability’ students and disabled students are also often perceived by educators as though their impairments represent their whole selves rather than just one facet of their complex identity. Biases result in lower expectations, the provision of poorer quality learning experiences, and the reduction of intellectual demands on learning tasks, all of which lead to diminished academic outcomes for marginalized students.

Guidance/strategies for educators:

- *Value student diversity.* Every class is heterogeneous. Educators who value difference hold positive and affirming views of all students, recognize students’ multiple and intersecting identities, and reflect these within their planning, programming, and classroom materials.

- *Support high expectations through relationship-building.* An inclusive educator focuses on developing students' sense of belonging by focusing on building rapport and trust and demonstrating personal regard for students. This educator earns the right to demand effort from all students to meet high expectations, while continuing to scaffold learning, remove barriers, and provide emotional support.
- *Ensure learning is accessible to all students.* By viewing the curriculum as adaptable to students' needs/experiences, educators can create responsive learning opportunities that are barrier free, cognitively demanding, and build on students' strengths.
- *Support students within the general classroom.* Rather than rely only on a pull-out model of remediation, inclusive educators design instructional routines and programming to embed support *within* the classroom. For example, providing flexible and responsive small-group instruction in literacy and mathematics not only supports struggling learners but indeed supports all students to take their next steps in learning.
- *Ensure the classroom teacher is students' primary educator.* Teachers are responsible for program design and for teaching all students in the classroom, regardless of disability or involvement in special education.

Questions for reflection:

- What barriers might exist for students to fully participate, engage, and demonstrate their learning? How can you remove these barriers?
- Which student identities may face disadvantage in your classroom? What is your perception of these identities?

Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction

UDL requires an educator to create learning environments that offer students a variety of ways to engage with learning. DI requires educators to provide multiple avenues for students to express knowledge, which may include assistive technology, as well as multiple ways in which students can respond to a task. While DI and UDL can be implemented without a deep understanding or reflection of a child's culture and intersecting identities, it is critical that educators include culture as a vehicle to provide more relevant and equitable learning opportunities (Fitzgerald, 2020).

Guidance/Strategies for Educators:

- *Set the conditions to support student learning.* Consider the learning environment: How are activities structured and are they accessible to all students? Consider the learning material: Who is reflected in the class material? Whose stories are being told?
- *If developing or amending students' IEPs, do so in collaboration with students and their families.* Make opportunities to meet and consult with each student/family about the development of the IEP. Recognize that students and families must be central to the planning and implementation process.

- *Commit to establishing an inclusive classroom culture.* Learn about and integrate disability culture and identity into classroom and learning materials. Create heterogenous groups that privilege friendships. For example, allow friends of diverse ability who support each other to work together.

Questions for reflection:

- How is disability represented within classroom materials? Do representations uphold or challenge disability stereotypes? Do they normalize in a positive way the diversity of student ability, expression, and ways of learning?
- Language can be used to explicitly or implicitly create an “in” group and an “other.” How often do you hear ableist/sanist words like “lame,” “crazy,” “stupid,” “idiot,” “moron,” or “ret*rd” in your classroom or school? How do you intervene?
- How is excellence recognized in disabled students? How are students encouraged and supported to meet curriculum and academic standards?

Special Education Referral and Assessment

Students are entitled to early identification and intervention. As such, special education can organize services, technology, and resources critical to students’ academic success. There is also a great deal that can be integrated into classroom practice (e.g. pedagogical strategies, accommodations) that does not require special education involvement. So when should educators bring students forward for further referrals and/or assessments through special education? The answer is that each situation is unique and will require consideration of contextual factors. One of the complicating issues with special education referrals is that the very difference perceived as impairment or exceptionality may be based on cultural, linguistic, class, or demographic experiences unfamiliar to those in the position of identifying difference. In particular, it is critical that the learning environment be assessed, not just the student.

Guidance/strategies for educators (What to try first):

- *Adjust practice.* It is important that educators address difference and respond by adapting the learning environment and employing strategies like UDL or DI to support student learning.
- *Reflect on the assumption of difference.* Consider whether perceived difference is a result of a cultural, linguistic, or experiential difference from that of the educator.
- *Accommodate.* Accommodations do not have to be formalized through an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) or on an IEP to be integrated or enacted in the classroom. Students may need an occasional accommodation to address time-limited, situational issues (e.g. illness, tiredness, travel) or ongoing accommodation to address extended experiences (e.g. impairment, family disruption, housing precarity, and so forth).
- *Work in partnership with students.* Families are critical partners in schooling. Students can also alert educators to what is working or not working for them in the classroom. It is critical that we integrate students’ values, goals, and aims into how they are supported in school.

When to refer to special education:

- *Technology resources.* Through special education funding, students can access useful technological resources such as computers, digital programming, augmentative communication, mobility aids, braille machines, and much more to assist their learning and their access to the curriculum.
- *Human resources.* Students may require the assistance of additional staff to support their daily activities in school. For instance, they may need a sign language interpreter, a child and youth worker, or an educational assistant.
- *Service resources.* Students may also benefit from access to specific services such as speech and language therapy, braille services, and ASL to assist in learning skills and ensure access to the curriculum, all of which may warrant a referral to special education. Note that school boards generally offer multilingual or first-language services to support students.

Racism and Bias in Education

Many students with various racial identities experience racism in education. Historically, students who self-identify as Black, Indigenous, Latinx, or Mixed have tended to experience barriers along their academic trajectories (Brown & Parekh, 2010; Parekh, 2013). However, other racialized groups also experience racism, such as anti-Asian racism, that may not have direct effects on academic achievement specifically. In addition to racism, students may also experience barriers in school based on their gender or sexual identity as well as their families' economic position. When examining data related to special education and racial disproportionality, two groups of students are consistently more likely to be overrepresented within the special education system: Indigenous and Black students.

Colonialism and Indigeneity

Indigenous and disabled experiences of schooling in Canada have been fraught with harmful, and at times lethal, practices (Ineese-Nash, 2020). There is a need to integrate Indigenous perspectives in classroom settings as a way to dispel stereotypical framings of Indigenous peoples, support reconciliation, and foster spaces where Indigenous children's unique methods of engagement are not pathologized.

Guidance/strategies for educators:

- *Commit to supporting Indigenous students through practising cultural safety and trauma-informed approaches where cultural differences, demonstrations of understanding, cultural knowledge, and experience are recognized and valued in the classroom.* The Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommends: a) developing culturally appropriate curricula where Indigenous students are able to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them; b) sharing best practices and information on teaching curriculum related to residential schools and Aboriginal history; and c) focusing on building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and respect.

Questions for reflection:

- How are Indigenous identities and histories reflected in the classroom/school?
- Which students are best served by current educator practices?
- Are certain practices harmful to particular students (such as Indigenous students within the context of residential schooling and current colonial forms of schooling in public systems)?
- What does decolonizing educational practice mean? How can educators think through decolonization when it comes to particular curricular areas (e.g. mathematics, language, science) and classroom practices (e.g. evaluation of participation, assessment, monitoring of progress and behaviour expectations)?
- Are you observing a variance in ability or a difference in approaches to learning (i.e. cultural differences)?

Anti-Black Racism and Schooling

Anti-Black racism manifests through educational policies, pedagogy, and practices and is often rendered invisible when coupled with the intersections of ability. Canadian and international research consistently show that students who self-identify as Black are one of the racialized groups most likely to be negatively impacted through special education practices and processes (Erevelles, et al., 2006; Parekh & Brown, 2019). Moreover, Black students are more likely to be perceived as demonstrating problematic behaviour in school, be subject to excessive suspensions and expulsions, and experience the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Erevelles, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014, 2016). Anti-Black racism can result in the overrepresentation of Black students in special education programs; the disproportionate implementation of IEPs in the early years; academic streaming in secondary school; and the disproportionate use of institutionalized processes/policies such as school-based team meetings and IPRCs.

Guidance/strategies for educators:

- *Centre Black students, families, and communities and use their expertise in decision-making processes.* Ensure educational decisions (e.g. development of the IEP, IPRC process, decisions to modify curricular expectations, decisions for special education or non-Academic programming placements) are made with guidance from the Black communities. Ensure full information is provided about trends and data relating to different programs, supports, placements, and pathways to ensure fully informed consent. Review assessment practices and tools for cultural biases; if biases are detected, find alternative options. Ensure positive racial identity is embedded in the curriculum as well as the resources tied to instruction.

- *Engage in professional learning* (readings, focused critical discussions, and capacity building) to deepen understanding of the trends and impact of anti-Black racism and ableism.

Question for reflection:

- How are Black identities and experiences currently represented within the classroom curriculum and learning material for all students, and where might intervention be needed?

- What leadership opportunities are available for Black youth within your school? How can Black excellence be recognized, fostered, promoted, and expected?

Gender and Sexuality

Studies conducted in Canada and internationally have shown that male-identifying students and students who self-identify as LGBTQ2S+ are overrepresented within special education categories and placements (Brown & Parekh, 2013; Yau, et al., 2015). In terms of gender, research shows that female students are more likely to be perceived as having excellent learning skills compared to their male peers (Parekh et al., 2018). Research results raise questions around gendered expectations related to behaviour and performance as well as how students may be socialized by different gender expectations in terms of their relationship to school/academic work. Research also shows differences in experiences of bullying and harassment across gender and sexual identities (Yau et al., 2014). Students who self-identify as LGBTQ2S+ have long reported a greater sense of exclusion in school (Parekh, 2014). Exclusion may be related to the heteronormativity embedded within the culture of a school, a lack of engagement through curriculum, and the continued stigma around teaching gender and sexuality issues.

Guidance/strategies for educators:

- *Select curricular material inclusive of positive and diverse gender and sexual orientation representation.* Examine curricular material for harmful or stereotyped representations of masculine, feminine, or non-binary roles. Where possible, ensure students have choice in material that cover a range of gendered representations. Ensure LGBTQ2S+ identities are included in texts and curricular material.
- *Monitor the climate in the classroom and intervene when necessary.* Immediately address incidents of bullying based on gender or sexual orientation or exclusion of LGBTQ2S+ students or students with LGBTQ2S+ family. Establish a safe classroom climate. Ask students for their preferred pronouns and share your own. Avoid describing curricular areas with gendered language (e.g. sciences as masculine).

Questions for reflection:

- What current school and classroom practices and structures are heteronormative and cissexist? How might these practices become inclusive of all genders and sexual orientations and of LGBTQ2S+ students, families, and communities?
- What forms of learning are being assessed? What materials are being used for assessment? How might these relate to notions of gender or sexuality?
- How might popularized perceptions of masculinity be in conflict with learning expectations in schools, particularly around behaviour and notions of compliance?
- Similarly, how might notions of gender influence educator assessment of giftedness, learning disability, or influence educator and student views around student “fit” in various subjects and courses such as STEM or the arts?

Class

Economic privilege has had a historic relationship to higher academic achievement and opportunities, while poverty is often associated with low school performance and overrepresentation within special education identifications and placements (Mansfield, 2015; Reid & Knight, 2006). Access to resources plays an important role in perceived ability, as noted by the significant relationship between high wealth and identification of giftedness in students (Parekh et al., 2017). Literature has shown that poverty can lead to the misidentification of disability (Howard et al., 2009) and that students in low income homes are more likely to be represented in special education categories and programs indicative of low capacity (Artiles et al., 2010; Brown, 2010). Furthermore, as a result of historical and systemic racism, there continues to be a relationship between race and opportunities for economic security (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2019). Therefore, it is imperative that when measuring and responding to student ability, educators take into account that students may have inequitable access to resources.

Guidance/strategies for educators:

- *Review assignments, measures, and assessments for class bias and the resources required to complete assignments and do well academically.* For particular assignments/assessments: What background experiences (e.g. cultural experiences, travel, technological) do students need to have to be successful? What kind of technology (e.g. equipment, internet connection) might students require?
- *Factor in socio-economic realities when assigning tasks for completion at home.* In addition to varying degrees of access to basic needs as well as phone, internet, digital devices, transportation, childcare, and so on, children from different socio-economic backgrounds may also have different roles within the family. What kind of access to family members or community supports might students need? How many hours are required to complete an assignment? Is there flexibility for students who are also employed, in caretaking roles, commuting, etc.? How much of the assessment is based on access to resources in the home or community? For instance, does it matter how many books (or libraries, electronics etc.) are available to the student?

Questions for reflection:

- Examine what items, experiences, ideas, and access are privileged in your classroom. How much space is offered in classroom discussions of new clothes, new technology, attending concerts, movies, going on vacation?
- How is poverty and/or wealth represented in the narratives within your classroom? Is it tied to merit? Is it framed as a consequence of broader social inequality?

Synthesis prepared by Luke Reid. For the full guide and references: Please refer to Parekh, G., Cameron, D., Gaymes San Vicente, A., Gordon, A., Ineese-Nash, N., James, C. E., Murray, K., Reid, L., To, J., & Underwood, K. (2022). *Equity and Human Rights in Special Education: Reflective Practice Guide*. Toronto: York University