Critical Engagement Module 2

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Part I: Exploring the Literacy Narratives & Experiences of Students & Their Families

I have a mission statement. I constructed it several years ago, and add it here for

contemplation:

I believe that kids want to learn, are capable of learning, and learn constantly as a natural

process. My mission is to create an environment of mutual respect that celebrates the

learning process, instills self-sufficiency, inspires curiosity, honors differences, and

prepares all students for life after our classroom. (Mollenkopf, 2014)

I realize that it is probably unusual for an individual teacher to have a mission statement,

especially considering that many school districts and individual schools spend a great deal of

time in staff meetings and professional development pull-outs, thinking about what is most

important to a them, and articulating it so that everyone is on the same page. Add consultants to

the process, and usually a great deal of money is also spent. I thought of my own mission

statement as I read Purcell-Gates (2002), explaining what schools and teachers can do to curb the

literacy problems, inherent in our educational system, that stem from cultural differences, and

writing, "...children of poverty are learners, have been learning since birth, are ready to learn at

anytime, and will learn." It validated what I do, to some extent.

As I evolve as an educator, I am always reflecting on my practice, as I expect all

educators do. At the end of every year, I am always taking copious notes on what I think went

well, and what did not go well, making sure that my students are also part of this evaluation. It occurred to me, after many years of reflection, that I kept coming back to the same basic principles: all kids can learn; all kids do learn, naturally; mutual respect and honoring differences are vital; preparing all students. This, to me, seems like it should be second nature to educators. Over the years, I have unfortunately learned that it is not. It is also why I reacted to our readings from Purcell-Gates (2002), and Nieto and Bode (1992) with such concern.

I cannot help, but return to the focus of my first reflection, the idea of how socioeconomic and cultural power affects the literacy of marginalized groups. It is, in my opinion, so far, the theme of this entire course. I refer back to my first reflection when I explained my DIPPS model. Looking through my lens as an American History teacher, I have developed five interrelated themes that applies to any study of history: how *disagreement* leads to conflict; exploring how *imbalance* affects the dynamic between two or more parties; evaluating the influence on decisions from the desire to keep or increase *power*; investigating change resulting from *progress*; and analyzing how differences in belief systems or norms in *society* affect relationships. Purcell-Gates (2002) once again gave credence to my focus on the "I" of imbalance and the "P" of power, even using the same words as she lamented the difficulty in "...eras(ing) this imbalance of power".

Before I expound on what I would have done differently in the case of Donny and Jenny, I would like to reveal something I have already done. As I was reading this selection, I had an epiphany that it is rare that imbalance and power do not go together in some way, making it unnecessary to separate the two. So, I have changed the "P" to *Power imbalance*. What Purcell-Gates has done, however, is to inspire me to change the "I" to *Identity*. As I have made

this change over the past few weeks, and shared my reasoning with my students, I am glad to report that they are happy with the change, not only because it helps their thinking, but because we are in effect celebrating how identity leads to many of the decisions we make as individuals and as groups. This celebration of identity helps us to be much more empathic with those in our class and their individual situations.

Celebrating this empathy, and the differences we have as individuals, as I wrote in my mission statement, is something I want to focus more heavily on, the rest of the year. Empathically placing oneself in Jenny and Donny's shoes, allows one to more easily scrutinize our practice by looking at it from another perspective. This is where my concern I referred to in my introduction originates. I was appalled at how the teachers in the case study viewed Donny and his family as having a deficit in their abilities, mainly because their culture did not line up with what the power structure of society defined as learning ability (Purcell-Gates, 2002). I would have done everything I could to understand Donny's family's situation to help meet him where he was. I would have started by taking the advice of Nieto and Bode (1992), by accepting Donny and his family's identity, and accepting their language. The school could have had aides on staff, that share Donny's culture to act in roughly the same capacity as the schools and teachers providing bilingual instruction, as described by Nieto and Bode (1992). And as the community is largely inhabited by other people from this social underclass, it seems to me that an education and inclusion initiative is something in which the local government and other community organizations could invest.

Being able to bridge that cultural gap is something on which I plan to spend more energy. I feel I do a fairly good job with empathy once I have discovered the cultural difference. Where I

need more support is identifying those differences. The case study from Nieto and Bode (1992) that resonated with me the most was that of Manuel Gomes, the immigrant from Cape Verde. I have never encountered a student from that country, but the explanation of how different the culture is from American life exactly mirrored what I experience in my own school with our ever-growing Somali population. Our Somali students run the gamut from a high level of cultural assimilation (which I am sad to say is an unfortunate example of the result of America's overall inability to accept new cultures into a community) and English language skills to students who have never attended school before, with a very limited understanding of not only the English language, but how to act in a school setting. Our Somali population, largely, are segregated in our attendance area in neighborhoods quite dissimilar from those of our white, suburban students. And, as each day passses, I worry that this new experience is so different than what they came from, that it can be, at times, incapacitating. I notice, because of this socio-economic segregation that most of our Somali students seem reserved to the fact that they will either work at the airport, or in one of the many warehouses in that area. It takes concerted and constant reinforcement to convince these students that they can aspire to whatever they want.

I learned from Manuel's story that it is vital for me to make the first move to bring this population into our school culture. Learning research is clear over the years, and Nieto and Bode (1992) affirm that one learns better when they can make a connection with information they already have stored in their memory. I must make a better effort to understand their situations and cultural differences, so that I may better relate to them on a personal and pedagogic level. I also would like to make a much stronger effort to learn a little of their language. The more insight I have into their culture the better I can help them make connections to their lives. I will

endeavor to connect with our district's resources to determine if there are any programs that can help me to that end.

Part II: Exploring the History of Languages & Linguistic Self-Determination

Smitherman (1986) and Bear (2008) continue this study by focusing on the way the American government has, over the last 150 years, purposely committed cultural genocide with our Native American population. This is evidenced by the fact that "...84 percent of all indigenous languages now have no new speakers to pass them on." (McCarty, Romero, & Zepeda, 2006). Linguistic self-determination, to me, is having power over your language preference. Viatori & Ushigua (2007) contend that, "...indigenous languages can be a vital component of strengthening communities' and individuals' identification with an indigenous nation.".

It breaks my heart to not only see these native languages lost, largely through the past efforts to "Americanize" Native American tribes in the late 19th, early 20th centuries, but to learn that these children actually feel shame for their native heritage, and hide it when within mainstream America, because of the pressure they feel to fit in, socially, educationally, and culturally. Bear (2008), shows how this continues through adulthood to the point that there is no one left to pass on the culture to the next generation. Again, I largely attribute this to the white power structure ensuring that there will be less to interfere with their culture, and thus be a threat to remaining in a position of power.

This is very much like the emergence of "Black speech", and the assertion of African American culture by groups like the Black Panthers, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Southern Christian Leadership Council

(SCLC) of the 1950's, 60's, and 70's, that Smitherman (1986) correctly explained created a reciprocal resistance from white Americans who feared the loss of their culture due to these new influences. Again, I return to this idea of power. In our discussions in my classroom, my students largely see racism largely the fear of losing power. White America, which, while maybe not dominating American culture, has had factions within it try to ensure that it remains prevalent. This fear by the group with the power, either real or perceived, that they are losing influence, manifests as racism, which leads to an ardent defense of the culture.

As an American History teacher, I do not think I have actually gained any new insight to the plight of Native Americans, or the erasure of their heritage. However, what the readings have reinforced to me is the idea that I must be calculated in the way that I reinforce empathic thinking by my students. By doing this, I can better facilitate understanding of ideas that are seemingly different. Only through this empathic lens are we all able to fully recognize how to not only engage these minority students where they are, but also continue to try and chip away at this tyranny of the majority as it relates to culture and power that has existed since Europeans first inhabited the New World.

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