

**Looking Back While Moving Forward:  
Examining Cultural Identity through Critical Reflection**

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## Abstract

As preservice teacher educators, we believe in the importance of infusing culturally responsive pedagogy throughout the courses we teach. Inspired by the works of Gay (2010), Ladson-Billings (2017) and Howard (2003), who emphasize the importance of knowing ourselves so that we can better know others, we began a study of ourselves and our cultural backgrounds, engaging in critical reflection on our socialized cultural identities. In this article, we share one process for critical reflection that stemmed from our research. In sharing this process, we discuss the following: (a) a review of literature that guides our work; (b) a framework for critical reflection to support middle level educators as they *look back* and *move forward*, using Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization; and (c) implications for middle level educators in classrooms and schools.

*Keywords:* culturally responsive teaching; critical reflection; preservice teacher preparation

As four preservice teacher educators, we believe it is important to infuse culturally responsive pedagogy throughout the courses we teach. We choose readings, plan course engagements, and attempt to create classroom environments that seek to honor, utilize and celebrate the rich, diverse cultures our students bring into our classrooms. Recognizing the need for us to serve as living examples of culturally responsive practices, we often question our effectiveness in utilizing and modeling these approaches for our preservice teachers in our classrooms. We frequently ask: Do our preservice teachers feel honored and valued in our classrooms? Do they believe their cultures are being uncovered and utilized? Do they believe our teaching practices support them in connecting with us and their peers? These questions led us to reflect on how to strengthen culturally responsive approaches as educators ourselves, supporting our students' learning in our courses and modeling this approach for them as they prepare to lead their own classrooms.

We are assistant and associate professors in a College of Education at a mid-sized university in the Southeastern United States. We are two black, two white, female, middle-aged, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual, preservice teacher educators. Collectively, we face challenges in our attempts to infuse culturally responsive approaches and build community among our own diverse teacher candidates, while simultaneously preparing them to work with diverse children and families. In response to these challenges, and inspired by the works of Gay (2010), Ladson-Billings (2017) and Howard (2003), who emphasize the importance of knowing ourselves so that we can better know others, we began a study of ourselves and our cultural backgrounds. We used Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization to practice critical reflection, 'looking back' on and examining our socialized mindsets in hopes of 'moving forward' toward liberation of oppressive ways of thinking and being.

In this article, we share one process for critical reflection that stemmed from our research. In sharing this process, we discuss the following: (a) a review of literature that guides our work; (b) a framework for critical reflection to support middle level educators as they *look back* and *move forward*, using Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization; and (c) implications for middle level educators in classrooms and schools. Our goal in this work is to model the importance of personal critical reflection on biases, assumptions and beliefs that we hold, both conscious and unconscious, as we support our preservice teachers in becoming cognizant of how these biases and assumptions guide their decision-making in the classroom and impact their work with students from all backgrounds. This work in middle level teacher preparation is of utmost importance as it aligns with the Association for Middle Level Education Middle (AMLE) Level Teacher Preparation Standards. For example, standard one on young adolescent development requires that

Middle level teacher candidates demonstrate their understanding of the implications of diversity on the development of young adolescents. They implement curriculum and instruction that is responsive to young adolescents' local, national, and international histories, language/dialects, and individual identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, culture...) (AMLE, 2012, p.1).

In order to support our preservice teachers to engage in these practices, skills, and dispositions, it is important as teacher educators that we critically reflect on our own practices, skills, and dispositions.

### **Review of Literature**

This work is supported by three bodies of educational research: (a) culturally responsive pedagogy, (b) critical reflection, and (c) cultural identity. These perspectives impact the ways in

which we understand ourselves and our work with preservice teachers. Additionally, these bodies of research greatly impact our decision-making as teachers and researchers in teacher education.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) has long-served as a measure of social justice and equity for teacher education programs seeking to develop competent teacher candidates prepared to work in diverse settings (Banks, 2007; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Pioneered by Ladson-Billings in 1994 as culturally relevant pedagogy, this educational framework seeks to build meaningful connections between students' school and home experiences. Proponents of culturally responsive pedagogy consider one's socio-cultural encounters, learned patterns of communication and other ways of being as the basis of instruction (Wu, 2016). Culturally responsive pedagogy is an organic, asset-based model founded in direct response to the deficit-oriented ideology that preceded it. As it evolves, so do the terms that define it. Paris' (2012) culturally sustaining pedagogy extends our thinking and "requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people" (p. 94-95). Should there be another sentence?

In response to Paris' (2012) framework, Ladson-Billings (2014) acknowledges frustration at how attempts to embrace culturally relevant teaching have grown static and put forth a new version of culturally relevant pedagogy titled, "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: The Remix." As we think about optimal ways to maximize the development of teacher candidates, we must heed Ladson-Billings' (2014) call to identify pedagogy that "shifts, changes, adapts, recycles, and recreates instructional spaces to ensure that consistently marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normativity- that is they become subjects in the instructional process, not mere objects" (p. 76). Should there be another sentence?

## **Critical Reflection**

While culturally responsive pedagogy calls teachers to examine the instructional decisions and spaces that impact diverse students, critical reflection is an introspective process one assumes to examine culture, beliefs, knowledge, experiences and values (Shandomo, 2010). It may call into question one's ways of thinking about an idea, perspective or opinion and change the ways you view others or the world (Husu, Toom, & Patrikainan, 2008). Using the process of critical reflection, one is able to develop new understanding by engaging in learning that constructs knowledge from insight gained as a direct result of the reflection. Brookfield (2004) posits the purpose of critical reflection:

Reflection becomes critical when it has two distinct purposes. The first is to understand how considerations of power undergird, frame, and distort so many educational processes and interactions. The second is to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier, but that actually end up working against our best long-term interests- in other words, those that are hegemonic. (p. 5)

Critical reflection is historically linked to Dewey's (1933) theories on reflective practice and the idea that meaning is created from the actions, activities, and ultimately the reflections in which we all engage. The deliberate actions that occur because of the meaning-making process are the focus of Dewey's work. Dewey believed that one must experience a change of understanding of self and the world as well as an awareness of the other as part of reflective practice (Sharma, Phillion, & Malewski, 2011). Critical reflection addresses moral, political and ethical contexts of teaching and has been used by educators to incorporate issues of equity and social justice into the classroom via culturally relevant teaching strategies (Howard, 2003).

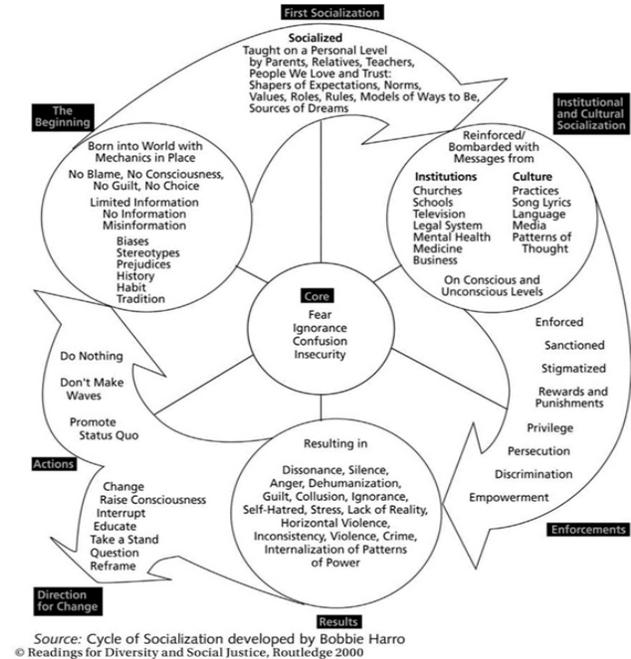
## **Cultural Identity**

Critical reflection and culturally responsive teaching are both deeply rooted in cultural identity (Ndura, 2004). Critical reflection into cultural identity offers educators an opportunity to examine and better understand their role and the social, historical and political contexts creating current educational environments (Florio-Ruane & Williams, 2008). Cultural identity is espoused in one's experiences, upbringing, and personal relationships (Jenkins, 2013). Although it is heavily influenced by contemporary circumstances, historical traditions, and rituals, cultural identity can also be shaped by critical incidents, or significant life experiences that may abruptly alter one's way of thinking and being (Woosley, 1986). Taylor (1999) refers to cultural identity as "one's understanding of the multilayered, interdependent, and non-synchronous interaction of social status, language, race, ethnicity, values, and behaviors that permeate and influence nearly all aspects of our lives" (p. 232). As educators, our professional identities are intricately intertwined with our personal and cultural identities, as we consciously and unconsciously share our life perspectives with those we teach (Sisson, 2016).

### **A Framework for Critical Reflection**

As part of our review of research, we began examining Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization. Harro's work became pivotal in providing a solid framework for us as we critically reflected upon our socially constructed beliefs, mindsets and positions within our worlds. In the following section, we share: (a) an explanation of Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization and its role in guiding our own critical reflection; (b) one author's example of a personal narrative based on Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization; and (c) a practical tool for utilizing Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization to support others through the critical reflection process.

**Figure 1: Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization.**

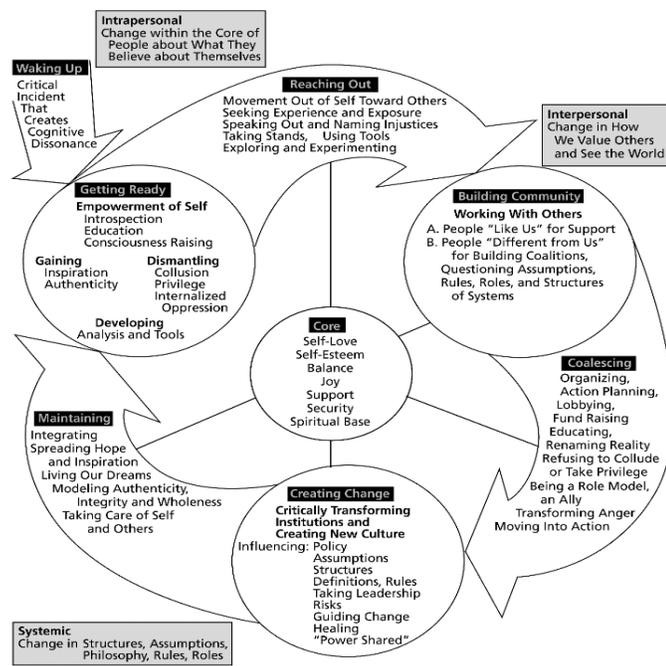


## Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization

The ways in which we are first socialized to understand and act in the world, shape “our sense of ourselves and our world” (Harro, 2000a, p. 17). In Figure 1, Harro’s (2000a) Cycle of Socialization, Harro details the processes by which social identities and roles are initially formed and later reinforced or challenged. Starting at *The Beginning*, Harro posits that we are born into a world with biases, stereotypes and traditions already established. We are powerless to the kinds of information or misinformation that we begin with in our lives. Harro then describes our *First Socializations* with close significant people in our lives (i.e. parents, friends, teachers) and our *Institutional or Cultural Socializations* (i.e. churches, schools, media, song lyrics). These socializations create our beliefs, mindsets, understandings and our positions within our worlds. *Enforcements* occur when these ideas are enforced and reinforced through various means, such as, reward and punishments, stigmatizations, persecutions, discriminations, and privilege. The

Results can then lead to feelings of dissonance, ignorance, stress and internalization of patterns of power. Harro (2000a) explains how limited, incomplete, or misinformation about the world can lead us to operate within the existing systems, either benefiting from and therefore perpetuating the status quo (*Actions*), or interrupting the cycle and moving forward towards liberation (*Direction for Change*). According to Harro (2000a), feelings of fear, ignorance and confusion form the *Core* of the socialization cycle block us from embracing a new mindset and reframing problematic structures that might then result in moving forward on Harro's (2000b) Cycle of Liberation. See Figure 2 for Harro's (2000b) Cycle of Liberation

**Figure 2: Harro's (2000b) Cycle of Liberation.**



Source: Developed by Bobbie Harro  
 © Readings for Diversity and Social Justice, Routledge, 2000

These cycles became a useful framework in helping us critically reflect on our cultural identities and the ways these identities impact our teaching in our preservice teacher education courses. We recognized the empowering possibilities of discovering a framework that supports

critical reflection, helping us better understand ourselves and the ways in which we attempt to understand others. Using this cycle, we practiced critical reflection by writing personal narratives. In writing these narratives, we agreed to focus on a socialized mindset or belief from *The Beginning* and/or *First Socializations* (birth through childhood) of our lives. We then reflected upon how that mindset or belief was “reinforced or bombarded” (Harro, 2000a) by additional *Institutional and Cultural Socializations*. We identified a moment of cognitive dissonance when messages from these socialized worlds were in conflict and considered ways these incongruencies impacted our work with others. We asked ourselves: How are our socialized beliefs and mindsets impacting our decisions? In what ways are we maintaining the status quo? Should we maintain our old beliefs or reframe and adapt them based on our new experiences and the meaning that we are creating?

### **Personal Narrative**

Below we provide one author’s example of her personal narrative using Harro’s (2000a) Cycle of Socialization. It is important to note that this process was challenging and humbling. It was a messy, non-linear process. We found ourselves pushing each other to examine our mindsets more closely and to be more honest with ourselves than we may have been able to do on our own. In doing this work, we formed a tighter coalition that ultimately helped us continue the work of reframing and rebuilding our mindsets.

#### ***The Beginning/First Socialization/Institutional and Cultural Socializations:***

*I grew up in a home that, for the most part, was very black and white. There was right and there was wrong. There was a belief that authority figures (i.e. parents, elders, pastors, teachers, doctors, law enforcement) should be obeyed without question. There was good behavior that would take you to Heaven and bad behavior that would deliver*

*you to Hell. At school I completed worksheets with questions that required one right answer. In my home, there was little questioning or wondering about possibilities.*

*“Because I said so,” was a common parental statement.*

***Enforcements:***

*Looking back, as a beginning teacher in a first-grade classroom, I used this lens to surmise the home lives of the children I was teaching. I believed that my students who were living in poverty came to school lacking the kinds of experiences and resources needed to be successful in school and it was my duty to fill their ‘gaps’ as fast as possible so that they might be able to catch up to their relatively, economically wealthy, peers. There was a right and a wrong way to prepare children for school success and I was there to “save” those children whose parents didn’t know this.*

***Results:***

*As a teacher, I operated from this deficit perspective, relying on my ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ lens of the world, until I began taking courses in my Ph.D. program. Slowly, I began transitioning from seeing the world as black and white to recognizing many shades of gray. I recall reading Cannella’s (1997) *Deconstructing Early Childhood Education* and feeling like I was experiencing a very disorienting paradigm shift.*

***Direction for Change:***

*Slowly, I started questioning my perspectives. I was, for the first time, beginning to use terms (and think in mindsets like) ‘multidimensional’, ‘multidirectional’, ‘multiple realities’ and ‘non-dichotomous.’ I remember wishing that I could go back to my first years of teaching and do them all over again. How many children had I dismissed, disrespected, and devalued with my black and white/right and wrong lens of the world?*

*How many children came through my classroom unnoticed because they didn't fit into my narrow mold of what counted for school success? How many children felt as though their homes and communities didn't matter to me? It brings me to tears. While I wanted to show them a world filled with love and kindness and respect, I realized that I had not. Not even in my own classroom. With my new lens of truths and multiple shades of gray, my paradigm shift began impacting my work with children. For example, I went from honoring basal readers as the right way to teaching literacy, to uncovering and utilizing the home and community literacies of young children to support their literacy learning in school. Currently, I am supporting preservice teachers in learning from the lived experiences of families who are unlike their own and working with them to interrogate their personal biases and critically reflect on them. My journey continues, and I still have a long way to go, but I no longer view the world in black and white and am eager to recognize and honor all the shades of gray."*

### **Tool for Critical Reflection**

This example narrative illustrates how Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization can support critical reflection on identity formation. Using this framework, we can better understand the ways in which our cultural identities are formed and impact our current decisions, perceptions, and our interactions with others. Recognizing the need to scaffold our preservice teachers' attempts to make sense of Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization in their own lives, we developed a tool for critical reflection. This tool includes Harro's (2000a) phases, along with sample reflection prompts that might help educators begin to analyze the systems at play within their own social worlds and ways in which they are "participants just by doing nothing" (Harro, 2000, p. 20). See Table 1: *Critical Reflection Tool: Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization*.

**Table 1: Tool for Critical Reflection Based on Harro's (2000a) Cycle of Socialization**

<b>The Core (Fear, Ignorance Confusion, Insecurity)</b>	<b>Phase</b>	<b>Ideas to Consider</b>
	<i>The Beginning</i>	The beginning refers to time before we are born. We are born into a world with pre-existing structures and identities (e.g. gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, cultural group, ability status, time period) in place. We have nothing to do with constructing these structures or identities.
	<b>Reflection Prompt</b>	
	Who are you? What are your basic beginning social identities?	
<b>The Core (Fear, Ignorance Confusion, Insecurity)</b>	<b>Phase</b>	<b>Ideas to Consider</b>
	<i>First Socialization</i>	First socialization begins immediately upon our births. This includes our families who contribute to our care and instruction. These people serve as role models in our earliest days and teach us how to behave. Beliefs like, “Boys don’t cry”; “Don’t worry if you break the toy, we can always buy another one”; “Don’t kiss other girls. You’re supposed to like boys” are taught to us explicitly and implicitly (p.17)
	<b>Reflection Prompt</b>	
	What messages or beliefs did you learn about your beginning social identities from your family during your first socializations?	

Phase	Ideas to Consider
<i>Institutional and Cultural Socialization</i>	Institutional and cultural socialization refers to the beliefs we learn through institutions and culture. These beliefs either reinforce or contradict what we learned during our first socializations. “Stereotypical messages shape how we think and what we believe about ourselves and others...The media (television, the Internet, advertising, newspapers, and radio), our language patterns, the lyrics to songs, our cultural practices and holidays, and the very assumptions on which our society is built all contribute to the reinforcement of the biased messages and stereotypes we receive” (p. 18).
<b>Reflection Prompt</b>	
<p>What beliefs did you learn from your institutions and culture?  Did these beliefs reinforce or contradict what you learned at home?</p>	
Phase	Ideas to Consider
<i>Enforcements</i>	Throughout our lives we have experiences that leave us feeling conflicted about the messages we are receiving from our first, institutional, and cultural socializations. We are forced to make a decision: do we reinforce the first institutional and cultural socializations or do we go against the grain, forming a new mindset?
<b>Reflection Prompt</b>	
<p>Describe some moments when you chose to maintain the status quo or normal.  Have you ever gone against the grain or “made waves” when your socialized beliefs were challenged?  Have you ever felt conflicted but decided to maintain your original belief system in order to be seen as a “team player?”</p>	

Phase	Ideas to Consider
<i>Results</i>	<p>We recognize that our socialized beliefs are oppressive in some way.</p> <p>This results in feelings and actions that build from the recognition of oppression within your beliefs.</p>
<b>Reflection Prompt</b>	
<p>Describe the oppression you recognize that has been built within your socialized beliefs.</p> <p>How do you feel? How do you see this oppression hurting you or others in society?</p>	
Phase	Ideas to Consider
<i>Action</i>	<p>Now that you recognize the oppression built within your socialized beliefs, what will you do next? It is easiest to do nothing: don't make waves, continue to promote the status quo.</p> <p>“Our silence is consent. Until our discomfort become larger than our comfort, we will probably stay on this cycle” (p. 20).</p> <p>OR: Change, raise consciousness, interrupt, educate, take a stand, question, reframe: leading to directions for change and Harro's (2000b) Cycle of Liberation.</p>
<b>Reflection Prompt</b>	
<p>What might happen if you embrace a new belief that contradicts your old socialized belief?</p> <p>What support groups could you join that might support your new belief?</p> <p>How can you build allies and coalitions?</p>	

## **Implications for Middle Level Educators**

Throughout our research process, the following implications became evident. We believe middle level educators should: (a) engage in critical reflection; (b) seek to understand the “other sides”; (c) persist through discomfort, conflict and fear; and (d) build connections and community.

### **Engage in Critical Reflection**

*As middle level educators, we need to take the time to prioritize critical reflection on our social and cultural identities.* Harro’s (2000a) Cycle for Socialization provides a framework for intentional interrogation of socially-constructed mindsets that impact teachers’ work with diverse students and families. As educators, we tend to focus our emphasis on curriculum, instructional approaches and strategies, assessment practices, and behavior and classroom management as we work with students. In doing this, we often overlook the social and culturally situated mindsets that serve as the lens through which we make decisions regarding each of these aspects of teaching and learning. Critical reflection on these mindsets can expose important beliefs and insights regarding how our socialized beliefs impact our students, families and communities. As we experience the change in understanding (Dewey, 1933) that occurs during critical reflection on mindsets concerning culture and diversity, our curriculum, instructional approaches, and strategies are strengthened through the process. Thus, we view critical reflection as a necessary and essential component of teacher education—one which addresses not only academic, but the moral, social, political and ethical contexts of teaching (AMLE Teacher Preparation Standard 5d, 2012; Howard, 2003; Howard & Navarro, 2016).

### **Seek to Understand the “Other Sides”**

*We must seek to understand and respect the “other sides” in spite of disagreement.* It is easy to follow our tendency to seek out like-minded people with similar cultural identities, reaffirming that our beliefs and perspectives are correct. The difficult work comes when we intentionally seek to understand the beliefs and perspectives of those that are unlike our own. This requires a humble understanding that we do not know it all and we are not necessarily “right.” When we recognize that our perspectives have been developed through our own experiences and cultural socialization (Harro, 2000a), we come to understand that we all create personal truths and beliefs in the same way. The mission becomes understanding the perceptions and points of view of others so that we can situate our own ideas within the larger, complex context of perspectives, diplomatically uniting people by capitalizing on our commonalities as well as differences.

In seeing the side of others, we must avoid embracing a privilege-based guilt and “saving” mentality. We cannot assume that our perspectives are “right” or “best” for other individuals or groups. Likewise, we must remain open to new ideas while recognizing defensiveness and hypersensitivity. As advocates of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), we must demonstrate how we are challenging preservice teachers to be more than simply relevant to or responsive of the cultural needs of their students, by seeing the perspectives of those students. In this way, we can help middle level preservice teachers come to understand “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 93).

**Persist Through Discomfort, Conflict and Fear**

*As communities and middle level classrooms within a constantly changing landscape, we must persist through discomfort, conflict and fear as we face the many differences in backgrounds and opinions that come with diversity.* Seeking to understand diverse perspectives is not easy. When faced with controversial issues in the classroom, preservice teachers often choose to avoid or ignore challenging situations out of fear of “doing it wrong” or upsetting students, families, or administrators (Murdock & Hamel, 2016). Many of us have been socialized to maintain the status quo, to not “ruffle feathers,” to placate, brush over, and avoid controversial topics. While these behaviors might appear to maintain peaceful interactions, they ultimately do not bridge differences or help any stakeholders better understand each other or complex issues. Using Harro’s (2000a) Cycle of Socialization requires that we personally examine the socio-cultural events that have created our identities, and the “mechanics, assumptions, rules, roles and structures of oppression...already in place and functioning” (p. 16). When we reflect on our own cultural identities (Jenkins, 2013) and deeply consider the richness associated with the benefits of pluralistic society (Paris, 2012), it is important that we face discomfort in an effort to move away from a mindset that celebrates the voices of some, but silences others.

### **Build Connections and Community**

*As biases and conflicts are illuminated through processes of critical reflection, we must intentionally build connections and community across differences in our classrooms and schools.* Harro (2000b) calls for building community in two ways: “dialoguing with people who are like us for support” and “dialoguing with people who are different from us for gaining understanding and building coalitions” (p. 466). Diverse perspectives add value and richness to our joint experience and understanding of the world. Classrooms can be model spaces where children

have the opportunity to dialogue with people of diverse perspectives in a space that is safe, structured, and deliberately supportive of all students. Creating opportunities for these discussions and building relationships can start with classroom engagements that encourage children to share their out-of-school worlds and cultures (e.g. Me Boxes, All About Me assignments, Where I'm From poems, Family Artifact Museums, Family Stories assignments). By sharing personal details about their lives, students begin to see commonalities and differences in one another, providing educators an opportunity to support children in learning with and from peers who are like *and* unlike them. Learning about students' out-of-school worlds supports educators in utilizing culturally responsive teaching practices that ultimately build connections and community in classrooms and schools (AMLE Teacher Preparation Standard 5c, 2012; Epstein & Hutchins, 2012; Gay, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

As teachers and teacher educators, we must accept our responsibility to engage in critical reflection that deeply examines our cultural identities. We must also recognize and understand our privileges, biases and assumptions, and identify cultural and institutional socializations that contribute to inequity, oppression, and discrimination. This work should occur both inside and outside our classroom doors. This is echoed by Long, Souto-Manning, and Vasquez (2016) who call educators to recognize the incredible power we hold in impacting the mindsets of our students and changing or maintaining the status quo. They stated

Because of the moral, pedagogical, and systemic choices we make, the young children entrusted to our care will (or will not) build understandings that no race, ethnicity,

language, religion, gender identification, economic situation, or sexual orientation hold more virtue or rightness than any other...They will (or will not) learn to recognize discrimination, silencing, and marginalization as well as strategies for working against these practices. ( p. 1)

As culturally responsive middle level educators, we must utilize critical reflection, and embrace the difficult work of “disrupting and dismantling” (Long, Souto-Manning, and Vasquez, 2016). Engaging in these practices strengthens our capacity to provide sustained educational opportunities that honor and support all students.

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