



Leading for Equity in Residencies: The Critical Role of Self-Knowledge and Cultural Competence

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Teacher residencies have emerged as a transformative model in educator preparation, designed to address persistent challenges in teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention. The Pathways Alliance (2021) defines residencies as “preparation pathways that are anchored in partnership and reflect a program curriculum that is collaboratively designed by local education agencies and teacher preparation programs to meet the goals of 1) ensuring aspiring teachers have affordable, high-quality opportunities and supports while they learn to teach, and 2) supporting the instructional and staffing needs of local schools and districts.” The residency model to educator preparation takes steps to diversify the teacher workforce by eliminating barriers that often keep potential candidates away from educator preparation, such as stipends and highly-trained and selected mentor teachers, as well as smaller class sizes and application assistance. Central to this model is a yearlong pre-service clinical practice where residents, who are not teachers of record, work alongside accomplished mentor teachers. This immersive experience allows residents to engage in the full spectrum of teaching roles and responsibilities across an academic year, ensuring they are well-prepared to meet the complex demands of the profession. Residency-prepared educators remain in the profession longer than their counterparts.

However, while residencies are often framed as equitable and responsive preparation pathways, the underlying assumptions and biases held by program leaders can significantly influence their design, implementation, and long-term impact. Educational leaders and residency program



directors wield considerable influence over what residents experience, learn, and internalize during their preparation. Their perspectives—whether consciously or unconsciously—shape decisions about program priorities, recruitment strategies, curriculum content, and definitions of "success." These decisions, in turn, affect who enters the teaching profession, whose experiences are validated, and which educators are likely to be retained.

A critical, yet often overlooked, aspect of residency program design is the need for leaders to engage in continuous self-reflection to examine their own biases and assumptions. For example, funding streams that require programs to identify and recruit “underrepresented populations” often emphasize numerical representation without interrogating the systemic barriers that have led to these populations being underrepresented in the first place. Leaders may focus on meeting funding requirements without deeply examining why certain groups are not entering—or staying in—the profession, thereby perpetuating a cycle of superficial diversity efforts that fail to address root causes.

Moreover, the hidden curriculum has the potential to become a potent force when program leaders neglect to scrutinize their own influence on program design. The decisions leaders make—whether in recruitment messaging, mentor selection, or defining what “effective teaching” looks like—carry implicit messages about whose knowledge, experiences, and identities are valued. Without intentional efforts to uncover and mitigate these biases, residency programs risk embedding a hidden curriculum that reflects the unexamined beliefs of their leadership, thereby limiting the transformative potential of the residency model.

We argue that for residencies to truly fulfill their promise of equitable and high-quality teacher preparation, program leaders must engage in rigorous self-reflection and cultivate an



awareness of how their positionalities influence program design. Only by intentionally examining and setting aside their own biases can leaders design residency programs that genuinely serve the diverse needs of aspiring educators and the communities they will teach.

Leadership Positionality for Equitable Residency Programs

Decades of research has shown that of the factors within the locus of control of educators and leaders, teachers are the most important factor in student achievement outcomes (Hattie, 2009; Stronge, 2007; Wiliam, 2016). Teachers are our most valuable human resource. For many reasons, teaching is a challenging endeavor and teaching assignments are difficult posts to fill and retain (Ingersoll, 2001; Sutch et al., 2019). Development and support for new teachers has received considerable attention in the literature, and theories of teacher development (e.g., Fuller, 1969; Watzke, 2003) and models/standards for coaching (e.g., Aguiar, 2013; New Teacher Center, 2018; Kraft et al., 2018) and teacher training practices (e.g., Reeves et al., 2022) abound. We know that supporting new teachers in the development of teaching methods and pedagogy, especially with practice and high-quality feedback as well as opportunities to observe and learn from others helps keep teachers in the classroom beyond year one (Ingersoll et al., 2014). There are many ways to lead in education, but the most important work, if not the most important, is the work leaders do to support the development and efficacy of teachers (Wiliam, 2016).

Another rich body of literature on teaching and leadership in education centers on deficit views, racism, multiculturalism, cultural competence/proficiency, and antiracist pedagogies and practices (Jones & Nichols, 2013; Lindsey et al., 2019; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Madkins & Nazar, 2022; Milner, 2010; Singleton, 2022). Through these lenses, teachers and leaders are charged to:

- identify and supplant deficit views of students and families



- center on assets students bring to their learning
- provide multicultural learning experiences
- engage parents and families in culturally responsive ways
- maintain strong relationships with and high expectations for all
- engage others in the identification and critique and dismantling of systems of oppression.

This body of literature resoundingly affirms the paramount importance of educators and leaders to know thyself, know thyself in relation to others, engage in critical self-reflection and representation, and shift focus from self to the broader system in which one operates ~~in order~~ to disrupt inequities.

In the following sections, a review of salient literature related to philosophical aspects of cultural difference (drawing largely from the works of Nichols, 1986, 1995) and themes of cultural competence/proficiency for educational leaders (Jones & Nichols, 2013; Linsey et al., 2019; Singleton, 2022) are synthesized. Subsequently, Milner's (2007) framework is adopted to provide a series of reflective exercises aimed to raise racial/cultural awareness and situate one's positionality in relation to leading and supporting systems for equity-minded teacher preparation programs.

Philosophical Aspects of Cultural Difference

In this section, we begin by articulating what we mean by *philosophical aspects* of cultural difference. We then provide a brief summary of how these philosophical aspects vary across a few cultural groups in order to provide a foundation and common language to bear in mind along your journey toward cultural competence. Before proceeding, a few clarifying remarks should be offered. First, keep in mind that “culture,” refers to the “shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning” (Littlebear, 2009, p. 90).



Drawing from the work of Nichols (1986, 1995), Jones and Nichols (2013) articulated three philosophical aspects of cultural difference: *axiology*, *epistemology*, and *logic*. *Axiology* is the branch of philosophy that centers on *values*. Different folks often hold different values with higher or lower regard. Moreover, the values one holds are resultant not only from their lived experiences, but from the systems of shared beliefs transmitted from one generation to another. In a pluralistic democratic society and the schools therein, leaders must be aware of the values individuals bring to their work and the communities that they serve. *Epistemology* is the branch of philosophy that explores *how we know what we know*. That is, a system of coming to know something about the world. For example, knowledge might be gained through inquiry and the scientific method—we often refer to this as “objective” knowledge. Other ways of coming to know something about the world include constructivist approaches—learning through experiencing the world, individually or collectively. *Logic* refers to *how one reasons through a problem or to an answer*. In other words, how folks construct an argument in order to come to valid conclusions. Examples of logic include deductive and inductive reasoning. Gaining an appreciation of how others come to know or rationalize their way to some conclusion, and what knowledge is considered valid is of great import in the field of education, where the transmission of knowledge resides at the very core of our work.

A brief explanation of these philosophical aspects among four categories of cultural groups are offered below. For a more thorough review, you might consider reading chapter two of Jones and Nichols’s (2013), *Cultural Competence in America’s Schools: Leadership, Engagement, and Understanding*. It is important to keep in mind that each individual you encounter does not necessarily fit with any single category, nor are these categories exhaustive and inclusive of all possible cultural groups. Furthermore, it is important to understand that Jones and Nichols (2013) utilize descriptors of each category which evoke ideas about race and/or ethnicity. To orient yourself with some language used



herein and with your own subsequent reflections, consider reviewing the American Psychological Association's (2023) *Inclusive Language Guide*.

Race is a “social construction [not an objective quality] and categorization of people on the basis of perceived shared physical traits that result in the maintenance of a sociopolitical hierarchy” (American Psychological Association, 2023). Our ideas about race are loaded with assumptions, pejorative ideations, biases informed by racial socialization with others and experiences (or the lack thereof) with others we perceive to belong to different racial groups (American Psychological Association, 2023). Moreover, ideas about race often evoke the assignment of value to people based on their ancestry and physical appearance (American Psychological Association, 2023; Singleton, 2022). Ethnicity refers to a characterization of people with shared ancestry, history, geographic and linguistic origins, and culture (American Psychological Association, 2023; Jones & Nichols; Lindsey et al., 2019). Ethnicity can be a helpful construct in coming to understand oneself and others but, like race, can also be fraught with insidious assumptions about superiority and inferiority. When thinking, reading, writing, or talking about race, ethnicity, and racial/ethnic identity (your own and of others), it is important to be cognizant of biases that may emerge; implicitly or otherwise.

Be careful about making assumptions about an individuals' beliefs, values, ways of knowing, and patterns of logic. Keep in mind that the following characterizations of different groups of people are not static and are not intended to identify any individual's values, beliefs, or anything else based on any physical traits that you may perceive about an individual. These characterizations are intended to provide a starting point for deeper exploration and engaged reflection. An individual's racial/ethnic identity is their own, can be fluid, and may not conform to any of the characterizations of cultural difference articulated below. An individual's identity is multifaceted and intersectional. The extent to which an individual identifies as a member of a particular racial or ethnic group



depends on how deeply one internalizes psychological, social, political, cultural, and other factors related to group membership and these things can change over time and in different contexts (Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019). Therefore, when having conversations with folks about race and ethnicity, it is always important to listen to and affirm their racial/ethnic identity and cultural self (American Psychological Association, 2023; Singleton, 2022). Nevertheless, drawing from Nichols (1987, 1995), a discussion of our philosophical aspects (axiology, epistemology, and logic) of cultural difference are framed within the following ethnocultural groups: *European/European American, African/African American, Latino/a/x, Arab/Arab American, Asian/Asian American, Polynesian/Polynesian American, and Native American.*

Axiology

Values are conditional. That is, what one values can change across time and contexts. Moreover, different folks hold different values, which can be heavily influenced by one's cultural identity. In a pluralistic society and the schools and districts therein, there are many values imposed upon schools and districts, teachers, parents, students, and community partners which may conflict with the many values of those served by schools and districts, including teachers. For instance, academic achievement outcomes on state-mandated summative assessments represent a value thrust upon educators and leaders who may not value test scores as much as other ways in which students might demonstrate learning. Similarly, teacher evaluation systems center on measures of teaching effectiveness, such as student achievement scores and scores from observation rubrics but omit myriad immeasurable aspects of teaching and learning to which a teacher might assign equal or greater value. In the construction of a shared vision of teaching and learning, leaders of residency programs must acknowledge the conditional nature of values and must understand how to navigate competing values, such as a central focus on supposedly “objective” measures of student learning



with other valued and valuable ways of demonstrating learning which are difficult to count or measure.

European/European American

Jones and Nichols (2013) identify two qualities of European/European American values: the significance of competition and individualism and the importance of precise timing. Drawing from cultural anthropologists such as Diamond (1999) and Fernández-Armesto (2002), Jones and Nichols point to the geographic and environmental realities of early Europeans where the change in seasons and short periods of time for sowing, growing, and then harvesting food (an “object” to be acquired) influenced the struggle of individuals to survive and thrive. In modern times, the European/European American axiology centers on the “object” (and its acquisition), and the linear and sequential steps toward that end. In education, this can be seen in the values of individualism and meritocracy, a focus on objects (such as test scores and accountability ratings) and their acquisition (higher test scores and accountability ratings), and the linear and sequential approaches to curriculum and instruction (through which higher test scores and accountability ratings will be acquired). Jones and Nichols defined European/European American axiology as having a *member-object* focus.

African/African American, Latino/a, and Arab/Arab American

The ancestors of the African diaspora, Latino/a, and Arab folks survived and thrived in geographies where seasonality was not as pronounced and thus, there was a greater abundance of food. Cultural values emerged where there was a greater emphasis placed on collaborative ways of living, placing a greater emphasis on relationships with others than the more individualistic and competitive European/European American axiology centering on the object. Consider the notion of *Ubuntu*, a word from one of the Bantu dialects in Africa:



Ubuntu...is a traditional African philosophy that gives an understanding of us as human beings in relation to the rest of the world. According to Ubuntu, there exists a common link between us all and it is through this tie, through our interaction with our fellow human beings, that we discover our own human qualities. The Zulus would say *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*, which means that a person is a person through other persons. (Manda, 2010, p. 14)

Nieto (1996) spoke to the notion of *familism* within Latino/a culture and showed that when authentic collaboration with families—that is, when schools and districts fostered strong relationships with and embraced families in advancing educational goals—educational initiatives were more successful. The high value placed on human relationships and the resulting need for trust elevates, even necessitates the value of respect for one another within an African/African American, Latino/a, and Arab/Arab American axiology. When the cultural value of respect has been threatened or broken, the harm done to the relationship can be irreparable. Jones and Nichols (2013) defined this cultural focus on community, family, collaboration, and respect as a *member-member* focus.

Asian/Asian American, and Polynesian/Polynesian American

Again, drawing from cultural anthropology, Jones and Nichols (2013) pointed to the vast migrations of peoples across the Asian continent and out across the Pacific Ocean as being dependent upon the collective decision-making and consensus of the group to survive and thrive. Jones and Nichols defined this axiology as having a *member-group* focus. In contrast to the value of individualism in the European/European American axiology, greater value is placed in the success and achievement of the group and interdependence of one another toward that end. Yamada (1997) spoke to the value of listening in communication in Japanese culture, where “the highest prestige is assigned to the unspoken” (p. 68) and the misinterpretation of silence on the part of cultural others:



Speech was increasingly associated with the cultured, and silence viewed as the domain of the savage. Indeed, the French still use the word “sauvage” to mean “savage,” but also “unsociable,” someone who does not partake in the art of discourse. (p. 17)

In educational contexts where European/European American axiology is *normalized*, a student with a *member-group* axiology who avoids eye contact when being spoken to by an authority figure (such as a teacher) may be misinterpreted as disrespect, when in fact the opposite is true. Asian philosophy and religious teachings imbue the *member-group* axiology with an emphasis on the success of the group and derision on individualism, as captured through Chinese proverbs: *The loudest duck gets shot; You cannot clap with one hand; A single tree cannot make a forest.* In educational contexts where European/European American axiology is *normalized*, students with an Asian/Asian American or Polynesian axiology may not hold the same values as the teacher as expressed in classrooms in which high levels of academic achievement earn students the opportunity to stand out or be distinguished from the group.

Native American

The axiology of Native Americans centers on, above all else, *Oneness* with the Great Spirit (*member-Great Spirit* focus). This obligates the individual to acknowledge the interdependence of all living things, between the self and nature. Communalism is the foundation of governance in the struggle to survive and thrive. Warner and Tijerina (2009) articulated four norms undergirding this axiological stance. First is the relationship-kinship obligation: that one's relationships to others determine the roles one assumes in society. Second is the responsibility to the community: that is, kinship imbues responsibility to one another. Third, all obligations are reciprocal and cyclical: for example, the obligation one has to kin is reciprocated by the kin to the one. Finally, the obligation of



redistribution and sharing guides one's actions: one has a responsibility to share resources and information for the good of the group.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that concerns *how people know what they know* (applied knowledge), *how people transmit what they know* (pedagogical knowledge), and *how people implement knowledge* (methodology). Given the centrality of epistemology in the field of education, it is important for educators and leaders to understand some cultural differences related thereto. In this section, a brief summary of how Jones and Nichols (2013) articulate some cultural differences with respect to epistemology is offered.

European/European American

The *member-object* focus of the European/European American axiology is consistent with an epistemological foundation that centers on counting and measuring. That is, one knows through counting and measuring (i.e., quantitative data). If it cannot be counted or measured, then it is seen as being less rigorous, valid, or legitimate. The European/European American epistemological stance can be easily seen through the dominant and ongoing neoliberal and standards-based movement in public education, imbued in statute law and administrative regulation from the federal- and state-levels. Our accountability systems, for example, include various measures of academic achievement and counts/rates of school exclusionary discipline practices all displayed on school and district report cards with colorful rating scales. Teachers operating in communities of practice or professional learning communities are encouraged to use quantitative measures of student achievement to identify problems of practice and work to meet the needs of their students by counting and categorizing them based on assessment scores.



According to Jones and Nichols (2013), the European/European American pedagogy gives credence to chunking and siloing of learning into discrete parts and that learning occurs when students assemble the discrete parts into the whole. This siloing can be seen in the ways in which we partition time throughout the school day, designating certain times for certain subjects. The chunking of learning into discrete parts can be seen in the work of teacher planning, where one or more standards are deconstructed into a series of chunks (e.g., a sequence of learning targets/outcomes/intentions) that comprise a unit of study or a lesson, which are taught in sequence until the end of the unit, when students are given some summative assessment to measure their learning against the standard(s). The methodology of the European/European American epistemology tends to proceed in a linear and sequential fashion. For example, teacher mentors are encouraged to use continua of teaching practices, such the Danielson Framework for Teaching or the California Standards for the Teaching Profession to evaluate various aspects of teaching practices, which are linear and sequential in design. These continua are arranged from lower levels of performance through higher levels of performance.

African/African American, Latino/a, and Arab/Arab American

The African/African American, Latino/a, and Arab/Arab American epistemology places greater emphasis on symbolic imagery and rhythm. Dixon (1976) proposed that people of African descent come to know through a holistic approach to learning and problem solving called *affect symbolic imagery*. Bell (1994) later expounded upon the idea that *affect*, referring to the feeling or emotive self, and *symbolic imagery* (e.g., words, phrases, gestures, tones, rhythms, and literal symbols) work in tandem with and are complimentary to one another, when one experiences phenomena in the world or works to solve problems. Gladwell (2005) discussed the concept of *thin-slicing*, or “the ability of our unconscious to find patters in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of



experience” (p. 23). Understanding the whole—or the “big picture”—before breaking it down into discrete pieces is an important aspect of pedagogy for the African/African American, Latino/a, Arab/Arab American epistemology. Through thin slicing, one sizes up a situation based on a holistic understanding and utilizes critical path analysis to arrive at some conclusion.

Asian/Asian American, and Polynesian/Polynesian American

According to Jones and Nichols (2013), folks ascribing to the Asian/Asian American and Polynesian/Polynesian American cultures come to knowledge through transcendental striving to arrive at a universal understanding or concept. To provide a metaphor, if one comes to know all aspects of the tree, then one will come to understand the forest. Similarly, if one comes to understand the physics of a drop of water, then one will come to know the physics of the ocean. Consider arithmetic, a universal understanding, for which a smaller and foundational concept to understanding arithmetic includes an understanding of numbers. The Chinese came to understand that the through the number seven, as a sacred number, was comprised of a set of subordinate numbers (i.e., seven and zero, six and one, five and two, four and three). The Chinese built the abacus, a device that can be used to compute addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division (all the forms of arithmetic) by manipulating beads organized as a set of two at the top and five at the bottom. In order to use the abacus, one must be able to see the whole abacus as well as the positions of each bead (part).

Chinese characters that comprise written language offer another example. In order to read a Chinese character, one must see the whole (character) and its parts (or strokes) simultaneously. For example, the character for the word “listen,” is made up of several components. One component symbolizes the ear, another the eye, and another the heart. In order to listen, one must therefore utilize the ears (i.e., to hear the speaker), the eyes (i.e., to observe the speaker carefully), and the heart



(i.e., to connect with the speaker's feelings). According to Jones and Nichols, folks with an Asian/Asian American and Polynesian/Polynesian American epistemological orientation come to knowledge by understanding the parts of the whole, and the whole, simultaneously. Folks from the Asian/Asian American and Polynesian/Polynesian American cultural groups tend to approach problems and their solutions in a cyclical and repetitive manner.

Native American

According to Jones and Nichols (2013), folks from Native American ethnic groups come to know through reflection and spiritual receptivity to the *Great Spirit*. In this epistemology, the individual comes to know through the path one takes on one's journey—figuratively and literally. For example, when an individual embarks upon their journey to find their path or discover who they are, they may be placed in an environment without food or water and use dreams and visions to identify the characteristics of the self, associated with self-discovery—often imbued in the representation of animals (an important part of Native American folklore).

Logic

Logic concerns how one reasons to an answer or through a problem. One example of patterns of logic are defined by Dweck (2006) as fixed versus growth mindsets. As Dweck posits, folks with a fixed mindset tend to see potential outcomes or solutions as an either/or situation. Alternatively, folks with a growth mindset do not necessarily view various situations, problems, or solutions in a black or white, either/or, good/bad manner. According to Jones and Nichols (2013), there are some differences between patterns of logic amongst folks from different ethnic groups. In this section, a brief explication of Jones and Nichols' distinctions in patterns of logic are discussed.

European/European American



People of European/European American descent tend to interpret the world using dichotomous logic. With dichotomous logic, phenomena are couched in terms of opposites that cannot coexist. That is, things are viewed in an either/or manner—a binary. There is nothing inherently wrong with dichotomous logic. However, when dichotomies are cast as good/bad, problems can arise. Such a misuse of dichotomous logic has been critiqued by feminists and other critical scholars for decades. For example, consider the binary construct of gender as male/female. The characteristics associated with male have been largely viewed as positive (e.g., being assertive, strong, decisive, etc.), whereas similar characteristics exhibited by females are interpreted as negative—they may be viewed as or labeled bitches. Under historical European law, women were explicitly viewed as object-property of their husbands. In English common law, husbands were allowed to physically abuse their wives. Women who practiced medicine were labeled witches and were burned at the stake. Similarly, scholars have critiqued the reduction of racial/ethnic differences in a White/non-White dichotomy as particularly problematic (e.g., Gillborn et al., 2018; Strader et al., 2022). Rowley and Moore (2002) provided a case in point related to racial/ethnic identity and academic achievement:

The literature on racial identity and achievement in gifted or high achieving African American students has been largely built on the notion that such students are forced to choose between a pro-African American, anti-achievement identity and a pro-White, pro-achievement identity. According to this perspective, gifted African American students are often pulled by two social forces: one in the direction of social acceptance of African American peers and another towards mainstream cultural values and norms. However, identifying solely with either of these groups while neglecting the other may be detrimental to students' psychological (e.g., self-esteem and sense of belonging) and academic lives.



African/African American, Latino/a, and Arab/Arab American

In contrast to the dichotomous logic, Nichols (1986) identified the use of diunital logic as characteristic of folks of African descent. Through diunital logic, it is acceptable for seemingly opposite phenomena to coexist. Nichols provides a splendid example:

In the Bible, the Pharisees confronted Christ with a tricky question: Do you pay taxes to Caesar? They expected a yes or no answer. If he had said yes, the religious community would have called him a hypocrite. If he had said no, the Romans would have jailed him for tax evasion. So he took a coin and asked whose picture was on it. Then he said give to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's. Christ used a diunital answer to avoid the pitfall of a dichotomous question. When children give us answers like this, we call them “smarty pants” and reprimand them. Instead of telling children not to do this we should say to ourselves, “My goodness, that’s an interesting diunital response.” (p. 5)

Asian/Asian American, and Polynesian/Polynesian American

Among folks of Asian descent, Nyaya comprises a dominant place in logic. Through Nyaya, the objective world is viewed as being independent of the thinking mind. Within this form of logic, chaos is viewed as a part of life and is inextricably embedded through iterative cycles of thinking through a problem, (re)creating in order to comprehend and make sense of the phenomenal world. As stated by Fox (2006),

Chaos is part of nature. It is part of weather systems, the unfolding of galaxies, supernova explosions, and black holes. It is also part of human nature...Chaos is part of human creativity...Artists recycle chaos. The creative process is often a passage through chaos. We need to educate for it, especially at this time in history. (p. 116)

Native American



Patterns of logic manifest through Pantheism, or the belief that all have the capacity for oneness with the Great Spirit. For sense to be made, balance must be maintained with Mother Earth. With balance, Mother Earth will provide for all. Balance occurs through a set of four and a set of three joining to strike a balance of the whole. For example, consider the set of four cardinal directions of the earth (north, east, south, and west) along with the set of three positions of altitude (above, on, and underground) in the bisecting planes comprising one's location. Such logic is consistent with Native American epistemology where one approaches problem solving through environmentally experienced reflection as an individual journey to find one's path.

Holding Space for Conversations about Race

Conversations about race are critical for folks hoping to develop a sense of cultural competence. However, such conversations can be frightening—especially when engaging with others from different racial/ethnic or cultural groups. This can be a significant deterrent to engage in critical conversations about race for many folks, and for White folks in particular. Often, White folks remain silent in conversations about race (Diem & Carpenter, 2018). Furthermore, it is not uncommon for White folks to adopt a worldview in which the best way to “deal” with race is to try and ignore it altogether and “treat everyone equally.” This is what Milner (2012) calls the colorblind myth. Another (completely normal) part of the journey toward cultural competence for White folks is the experience of White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), or defensive moves that White people make when challenged about race/racism. White fragility is often characterized by emotions that include fear, anger, or guilt and behaviors that include argumentation and silence. When engaging in conversations about race, it is important to be aware of others' emotions and behaviors and to recognize emotions and behaviors that might undermine productive dialog to build understanding and move toward cultural competence.



Singleton (2022) articulated four agreements of courageous conversations, intended to guide folks through engaged reflection and dialogue: (a) stay engaged, (b) speak your truth, (c) experience discomfort, and (d) expect and accept non-closure. These agreements should be made explicit to all members of the conversation and should be monitored and discussed in the space for conversations about race. Staying engaged means “remaining morally, emotionally, intellectually, and relationally involved in the dialogue” (Singleton, 2022, p. 81). Speaking your truth means “being absolutely honest about your thoughts, feelings, and opinions and not just saying what you think others want to hear” (p. 82). Given the real problems related to race and racism in the United States, conversations about race and racism can often be uncomfortable. When engaging in courageous conversations, an important agreement is to sit with the discomfort—since such conversations would simply not happen. Furthermore, courageous conversations do not always afford closure to participants seeking a deeper understanding of racial understandings or interracial interactions. As such, participants must expect and accept non-closure; there is no “quick fix” to the problems resultant from racism. Non-closure can be difficult to accept, given that educators and leaders often attend professional development opportunities that espouse clear procedures, steps, or solutions to problems.

Reflexive Reflection

Milner’s (2007) framework for critical self-reflection begins with the individual reflecting on their own racial/ethnic and cultural self. In the second aspect of the reflexive exercise, the individual attends to the racial/ethnic and cultural selves of others whom they serve. The third aspect of this process requires the individual to engage in collaborative reflection with others. Finally, the individual shifts the focus from the self to the system, by explicitly articulating how they might ground their work as a leader, given their expanded understandings of self and others within the institution. It is important to note that this exercise is intensive and ongoing. That is, this work can



be difficult and is never complete. Nevertheless, the guiding prompts articulated herein provide a framework for this ongoing work as points to visit and revisit.

Researching the Self

The best place to begin is by looking within. On the path to cultural competence, leaders must have a deep understanding of their own racial and cultural heritage as well as an awareness of how one's racial and cultural heritage might influence their work as leaders. The following prompts are intended to provide space for your reflection. There are no incorrect responses, but special attention should be given to *how* you know (epistemology). As you reflect, be on the lookout for deficit views that you might express, implicitly or otherwise.

- What is my racial and cultural heritage? How do I know?
- In what ways do my racial and cultural backgrounds influence how I experience the world, what I emphasize in my work with novice educators, and how I evaluate and interpret others and their experiences? How do I know?
- How do I negotiate and balance my racial and cultural selves in society and in the context of my work with novice educators? How do I know?
- What do I believe about race and culture in society and education, and how do I attend to my own convictions about race and culture in my work with novice educators? How do I know?
- What are and have been the contextual nuances and realities that help shape my racial and cultural ways of knowing both past and present? How do I know?
- What racialized and cultural experiences have shaped my decisions, practices, approaches, and agendas in my work with novice educators?

Researching the Self in Relation to Others



Mirroring the previous exercise on *Researching the Self*, another aspect of this process shifts the focus to what is known about those whom one serves: in this case, novice educators within the teacher residency program(s) you lead. The following prompts are intended to provide space for your reflection. Remember that there are no incorrect answers, and that special attention should be given to *how* you know (epistemology). As you reflect, be on the lookout for deficit views that you might express, implicitly or otherwise.

- What are the cultural and racial heritage and the historical landscape of novice educators I work with? How do I know?
- In what ways do my novice educators' racial and cultural backgrounds influence how they experience the world? How do I know?
- What do my novice teachers believe about race and culture in society and education and how do they tend to the tensions inherent in my and their convictions and beliefs about race and culture in education? Why? How do I know?
- How do I negotiate and balance my own interests with those of my novice educators, which may be inconsistent or divergent from mine? How do I know?
- What are and have been some social, political, historical, and contextual nuances and realities that have shaped my novice educators' racial and cultural ways or systems of knowing both past and present? How consistent and inconsistent are these realities with mine? How do I know?

Engaged Reflection and Representation

It is important to note that aspects of this framework are not necessarily completed in a linear and sequential fashion. That is, as you reflect, you may learn more, and this new learning may impact previously expressed reflections. In other words, reflecting about the prompts provided in



the first two aspects, *Researching the Self* and *Researching the Self in Relation to Others*, might be approached as an iterative process, in which cycles of reflection move the individual back and forth between these two sets of reflective prompts self and others. While this exercise is not necessarily linear and sequential, it is recommended that the individual takes sufficient time to express at least some preliminary reflections in light of the prompts from *Researching the Self* and *Researching the Self in Relation to Others* prior to engaging collaboratively in collective reflection. As a group, perhaps beginning with a group of peer-leaders from other residency programs, consider the following prompts to ignite and guide reflective dialogue:

- What have you learned through *Researching the Self*?
- What frustrations or tensions emerged through *Researching the Self*?
- What have you learned through *Researching the Self in Relation to Others*?
- What frustrations or tensions emerged through *Researching the Self in Relation to Others*? What more would you like to know about the novice educators you serve? How might you come to know more?
- What biases did you identify through *Researching the Self* and *Researching the Self in Relation to Others*? How might these biases, implicitly or otherwise, undergird the decisions, practices, approaches, and agendas in my work with novice educators? How might these biases be supplanted or reconciled in your decisions, practices, approaches, and agendas?

An important aspect of *Engaged Reflection and Representation* is ensuring others are represented in the dialogue. While it may be helpful to begin with engaged reflection with your peers from other residency programs, it is also important to engage in dialogue with your teacher residents—especially those from different racial and cultural backgrounds. However, it is important that this work be conducted within a safe space so that voices, narratives, and counter-narratives are represented and



that no voices are privileged over others. Attending to Singleton's (2022) four agreements may help foster such a safe space as you engage with your novice teachers.

Shifting Focus from Self to System

The difficult work of critical self-reflection undertaken in the preceding exercises must not be completed solely for the self, although we hope that the reflection thus far has moved your learning further in coming to know thyself and those whom you serve more deeply. Reflection for the sake of personal growth is a noble enterprise indeed. However, as Freire (1970, 1974) asserted time and time again, the deeper understandings we gain through critical self-reflection and growth must translate into action in the service of others—what he called *praxis*. In this culminating exercise, consider the following prompts to adjust the lens of your reflection toward the organizational and institutional perspectives of the system(s) in which you operate and the community/communities you serve. In doing so, we hope opportunities for organizational change and development emerge to foster a more culturally competent experience for novice educators learning in residence.

- What is the contextual nature of race, racism, and culture in my organization? In other words, what do race, racism, and culture mean in my organization and the broader community served? How do I know?
- What is known, socially, institutionally, and historically about the organization and community served? In other words, what do others within the organization and community, including those from indigenous and marginalized backgrounds, write or state about the community or the organization? Why? How do I know?
- What systemic and organizational barriers and structures shape the organization and community, locally and more broadly? How do I know?



Conclusion and Invitation to Continue Self-Discovery, Critical Self-Reflection, and Praxis

The path to cultural competence is one that never ends. In order to be culturally competent, one must continually immerse oneself in deep and critical self-reflection. The guiding questions posed by Milner (2007) provide a structure for ongoing critical self-reflection and the four agreements from Singleton (2022) provide some norms for engaged reflection with others. However, metacognitive reflection about issues of race/racism is not enough. To continue the work, you must commit to ongoing engaged reflection (i.e., critical conversations) with others. Furthermore, you must commit to praxis. Praxis, articulated by Freire (1970, 1974), refers to the actions one must take, the need for which is resultant from the fruits of critical self-reflection. We hope that this leadership positionality work will serve as a foundation to continue your critical self-discovery, reflection, and praxis, as you work to support increasingly diverse cadres of educators entering the teaching profession.



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