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Students at the Center, Progress in the Present: Integrating Frameworks for Justice-Oriented Learning

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Students at the Center, Progress in the Present
Integrating Frameworks for Justice-Oriented Learning

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Abstract:

In this paper, Ryan Baker reflects on his student teaching experience in a diverse, urban high school in Tacoma, WA. As he grapples with the intersection of his teacher identity, as a White male who seeks to teach towards social equity and the unit that he taught to two Senior English classes, he examines how the framing of the unit, and writing tasks that were part of the unit, were misaligned with the justice-oriented outcomes he hopes to teach towards as an educator. As he reconsiders the ways in which he engages his students in learning, he attempts to align culturally-responsive pedagogical practice with state-mandated learning outcomes and social justice-driven goals as a means to build required thinking, reading, and writing skills in his students, while simultaneously producing justice-oriented outcomes.

Question Posing

In my student teaching placement in a Senior English classroom, I fell into two major traps in how I viewed my students: first, I primarily viewed them through a deficit-lens. Because many of them possessed relatively low skills in analytical reading and writing, I felt the need to continue my mentor teacher's work of building these skills. This felt like a particularly pressing approach, as I felt urgently tasked to build as many analytical skills as possible before my senior students left high school, and with most leaving formal educational spaces behind them for the indefinite future.

The second trap I fell into was born out of this deficit view: I only focused on acclimating my students to the "culture of power" by asking them to read, write, and think through formalized educational paradigms that have been created, dispersed, and demanded by White Americans that have not sought to include the perspectives of non-White populations regarding educational processes or desired outcomes (i.e. "ways of doing school"). By focusing on my students' deficiencies and hurriedly attempting to craft thinking and writing skills (with the hope that those skills would better equip them to navigate a highly competitive, socioeconomically-stratified society) I never thought about how centering students' culturally-influenced perspectives and experiences might better equip them to engage with the content that I chose to teach.

Furthermore, I did not attempt to know or build upon students' writing or communication skills that may have been influenced by their cultural identities. In this sense, my focus on attending to the academic norms of the dominant (White) society precluded my attention to drawing on students' already developed skills, that might have been formed outside of traditional educational spaces; those personal, foundational skills are often not privileged in academic

spaces, and I had a role in perpetuating that exclusion in my practice. Even now, as I understand culturally-responsive pedagogy to be an important part of teacher practice that better enables students to find “access points” into the curriculum, I’m left wondering how culturally-responsive teaching can also be used to directly produce learning outcomes and ways of thinking that build tangible skills within my students.

Throughout this exploration, I will draw on Rychly and Graves’ work in defining teacher characteristics that enable culturally-responsive pedagogical strategies. They reference scholar Geneva Gay in defining culturally-responsive pedagogy as they write, “Culturally responsive pedagogy . . . is ‘using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively’” (Rychly & Graves, 2012). If culturally-responsive pedagogy asks students to interrogate, name, and utilize their culturally-influenced perspectives and experiences to understand how and why they are responding to the curriculum in a personalized way, that’s great. I want my students to engage in that level of self-interrogation and metacognition, and I also want students’ thoughts and culturally-influenced perspectives and experiences to be shared and built upon in the classroom. However, I’m left wondering to what degree these meta-cognitive processes and elicitation of self-narratives will continue to develop my students’ tangible thinking and writing skills, that also attend to the demands of the world that they are about to enter in to.

The demands of American society are marked by the legacies and perpetuation of insidious forms of White supremacy and have created White-dominated epistemological biases, cultural norms, and largely rigid ways of existing in educational and professional spaces. While students would be disserved by me not addressing those demands, there also exists the need to center students’ culturally-influenced perspectives and experiences within the curricular content.

As an educator, I need to disrupt the expectations that students adhere to a specific way of moving through society, and I must make space for students to center their own lived experiences in order for them to explore the alignment, or misalignment, between their own culturally-influenced values and the expectations placed on them by a society that is rooted in White supremacy.

With that, I am left considering this question: How can I align culturally-responsive pedagogical strategies and state-mandated learning outcomes to build meaningful thinking, reading, and writing skills amongst my students, for the purposes of working towards an equitable, inclusive society?

Examining Teacher & Student Evidence:

One of the many benefits of getting to primarily teach Senior English courses was that I was able to choose what materials and texts we engaged with, and the manner in which we did so. There was literally no pre-established curriculum to follow. In turn, the majority of my three months of student teaching was focused on a unit I titled “American Immigrants & Refugees.” In this unit, we read works of fiction (short stories and poems) that were centered on the difficulties that minoritized communities (comprised of immigrants, migrants, and refugees) experienced in the realms of public education in America, language politics, and the effects of trauma that groups carry with them as they are forced to leave their homelands.

When I was planning this unit, I was doing so partly out of anger with the current Presidential administration’s policies, and partly out of a flimsy idea that placing these texts in front of students constituted culturally-responsive teaching. Both myself and my students at the time were particularly upset about President Trump’s repeated hate speech surrounding immigrants and refugees. I wanted to teach a unit that had current social and political relevance,

and I thought that by including works of fiction that were written by authors that are people of color (and represent other historically marginalized groups) that those texts might automatically resonate with my students who themselves were largely students of color, and/or economically disenfranchised students. I also thought that by including texts with such racially and ethnically charged subject matters, I would be subtly signaling to my students that I was a teacher who was interested in dismantling racism, xenophobia, and inequities; a teacher who was capable of teaching students like them.

In many ways, this inclusion of materials that centered on narratives of disenfranchisement that minoritized communities face was an extension of what I've long envisioned my teacher identity to be. Since making the jump towards becoming an educator, I've wanted to be an educator who teaches my students how to participate in realizing the goals of social justice and equity. I view my future teacher-self as a teacher who will enable students to make sense of the economic, political, and social realities that exist in our local, national, and international arenas. I have also consistently held the belief that teaching students about the injustices in our communities, both local and imagined, is crucial in the fight for systemic social change. While I've always tried to fight the "White savior" complex, that is so pervasive in amongst teachers in urban settings, I *have* viewed myself as playing an important role in teaching future generations about how oppressive, systemic forces have shaped our society, and how they have had particularly sinister effects on people of color and other marginalized groups.

While my focus has been on what *I* can do to create meaningful impacts on shaping students' understandings of the world, I've also envisioned myself as serving as a conduit to other resources through which students might engage with social issues via alternative formats. In particular, I've always been inspired by my own teachers who have brought community

members into the classroom to host conversations about social issues that those community members are involved with in solving. I thought of myself as a teacher who would be tasked with helping students make sense of the world (while building academic skills along the way) by asking them to engage with realities that shape their communities, and through interactions with members of their communities who were seeking to reshape the narratives and conversations that exist surrounding local, complex issues. By creating this unit, I thought that I was beginning to do the work that I set out to do: to equip students to grapple with various injustices in the world so that they, as future voters and informed members of society, might be able to better respond to the systemic inequities that produce localized impacts.

With that, I'm now realizing that the content you put in front of students is hardly the end-game that I thought it was; it's what you do with that content, and how you engage students with it, that enables students to make productive connections to their own lived experiences. In this arena, I undoubtedly fell short. In particular, I'm thinking about the way that I presented and framed the "American Immigrants & Refugees" unit. While I subtly wanted to signal my "wokeness" to my students by discussing the issues of race, xenophobia, and oppression during the unit, I didn't want *them* to think that I was just another White guy trying to prove something to them about myself (even though I partially was). I didn't want them to feel like I was putting their racial or ethnic identities on blast; I didn't want my students to think that I was essentially saying, "Hey, we're going to read stories about how minoritized groups experience hardships in the American education system - you know, like you guys!"

So, instead of having a frank conversation with students about how marginalized groups experience various realms in American society, I instead tried to mask my subtle virtue signaling by attempting to legitimize why we were going to engage with American immigrant/refugee

experiences by framing my reasons for teaching the unit in terms of political topicality, and as a means to increase empathy for groups who were being targeted by our federal government. To do this, I silently presented students with a series of images that contained news headlines pertaining to the Trump administration's targeting of immigrants and refugees, as well as a number of headlines related to refugee crises throughout the Middle East, SE Asia, and Europe. I then re-displayed the images while explaining what each headline was referring to, in case students were not aware of the various policies, crises, and wars that are taking place here and abroad. After preaching at my students about the atrocities being committed in the world, I asked them to discuss this question at their table groups: "Why do we constantly read books that are focused on struggle, hardship, and difficult social issues?"

As students shared out from their table discussions, their thoughts centered on how conflicts in fiction are necessary for engaging plotlines, and about how it's important to learn about other peoples' experiences. I latched on hard to these contributions, because I was happy that students had a tacit understanding of why we were about to delve into two months of literature that highlighted the oppression and active disenfranchisement of minoritized populations via xenophobia, assimilative pressures, and inequitable social programs.

However, in all honesty, I didn't have much of an answer myself to this question - I was relying on their contributions to push a discussion *without* having much of a plan to push their thinking. I then read them an article from *The Atlantic* that attempted to do that work for me. The article focused on how, in many high school curriculums, students are asked to grapple with complex, difficult-to-read texts that deal with the thematic content that we were preparing to engage with. The article then pushed back on *how* those texts are typically taught: focusing on pairing fictional texts with non-fictional historical documents, or simply focusing on the analysis

of how the text was being constructed by the author. The article argued that students should also be asked to consider and reckon with the legacies of trauma, hardship, and oppression that the thematic content of such literature demands consideration of. The author believed that this work was imperative to building a conscientious, empathetic citizenry that might be better prepared to take action against such injustices later in their lives.

However, there existed a sick irony in my reading of this article: I had my students consider this article, talked about *how* it's important to build empathy for people via reading fiction, but I didn't know *why* it was important to do that, and I also failed in actually focusing on the legacies of injustice in our future readings. This ultimately led to my inability to lead my students in considering how the thematic content we were reading about actually related to their own lived experiences. Why? Because I was afraid to hear their stories. I was afraid to hear their stories because I didn't know what to do with them once I heard them.

At the end of class on that first day of framing the "American Immigrants & Refugees" unit, I handed students an index card and asked them to write in response to the following prompt: "Why are we entering into a unit about American immigrants and refugees?" Between the two periods that were entering into this unit, I received 43 written responses. I then culled those 43 responses and grouped them with like-minded answers from similar students. I was able to categorize their responses as such: 37% of students responded that we were entering into the unit because it was a current event; 18% of students responded that we were entering into the unit to learn about the stories of how immigrants and refugees are being treated by society; 17% of students wrote that we were entering into the unit to learn about how we can help immigrants and refugees; 16% of students wrote that we were entering into the unit because learning about other people's problems help us contextualize and work through our own problems; and 12% of

students wrote that they either weren't sure, stated that we were only entering into the unit because it was my choice, or didn't want to discuss their point of view regarding our reasons for entering into the unit.

This scattershot of responses by my students is indicative of a few things; first, I believe that my students' multitude of answers stemmed from the fact that I, myself, did not present a cogent "why" for the work we about to enter into. In retrospect, my aim was not so much to enable students to connect their own experiences to the upcoming content matter. Rather, it was to preemptively defend the content that I was uncomfortable teaching. I was framing the purposes of the unit in a way that allowed me to manage my anxiety of being viewed as a fraud; as a White teacher who was performative in attempting to show their students that they care about social justice issues. By showing them images of news headlines, I wanted to convey to them that the topics we were discussing were objectively timely and important.

In turn, students' responses largely indicated that they thought we were learning about American immigrants and refugees because of its topicality or because of the importance of learning about how marginalized groups of people were being treated. Only 35% of students indicated that they thought we were learning about American immigrants and refugees to build some sort of skill; either to learn how we might help others, or because of how literature enables us to help ourselves. I believe that the fact that a minority of students indicated skill building-focused answers reflects the fact that I did not have a clear idea about how process-based skills could be built through the study of literature. Most strikingly, student responses mostly did not include any responses about how learning about others' lives had anything to do with them. In framing the unit, students were not asked to consider how reading about the lives of immigrants and refugees might have an impact on themselves, or about how

the upcoming thematic content might have any personal resonance. While attempting to legitimize a lengthy unit of study, that I was uncomfortable with, I did not ask students to explore their own frames of reference surrounding the thematic content that I largely framed as a politically urgent matter, that existed outside the scope of the purview of literature's ability to produce meaningful personal insights, reactions, or connections.

I'm left thinking about what the impact of eliciting student experiences related to the thematic content of the texts we read might have been. Truth be told, I didn't provide meaningful opportunities for my students to connect their own lived experiences to the thematic content that we were engaging with, despite the fact that the themes focused around people of color and other marginalized groups facing discrimination and systemic oppression in educational settings. This focus was extremely "meta", but because I didn't want students to feel like I was highlighting their potential similarities to the marginalized groups we were reading about, I did nothing to try to make those connections. I was crippled by my concern that the impact of placing these texts that highlighted the marginalization of students in educational settings, would be that students would feel like I was putting their own experiences under a microscope.

While my intent in having students engage with these texts was for them to understand the experiences of marginalized newcomers to America, I was concerned that I would be doing harm to them by asking them to attempt to relate their own experiences to the thematic content that was present in the texts. Instead, I retreated to the seemingly neutral focus of simple textual interpretation, rather than asking them to center their own experiences in relation to the text. Because of this fear, I became so focused on helping students make surface-level sense of the complex texts we read, that I didn't embrace the idea that a potentially more impactful way of

getting “in” to the text might have been, through tapping into the emotional and psychological weight of the works in question.

In part, this retreat to the comfort of literary analysis for analysis’ sake mirrored my own educational experiences; my way of “doing school”, particularly in the humanities, has been to rely on interpreting and considering the words on the page: what is the author’s message? Why do they want us to think about these difficult themes? Because I don’t have a personal history or connection to themes of oppression, assimilation, or disenfranchisement, I have only a tacit emotional connection to texts that discuss these themes. It truly speaks to my privilege that I’m able to 1) read narratives produced by members of disenfranchised, disempowered populations, 2) deeply feel what I can only classify as “hopeless empathy”, but 3) put the story down and choose whether or not to further engage or explore the emotional and psychological impact that that narrative has had on me. I rarely dig into those emotions.

However, my own hesitance towards digging into the complex host of emotions that narratives can evoke shouldn’t mean that my students don’t get the opportunity to explore their own emotions, or how how their culturally-influenced perspectives and experiences shape their reactions. Or, if they don’t immediately feel those connections, it doesn’t mean that those emotions shouldn’t be drawn out during our classroom discussions. My own lack of personal connections to the texts, and my fear of making students feel like I was putting their potential marginalization on display, made it so that I didn’t do the very thing I implicitly argued for in the beginning of the unit, which is to go beyond the interpretation of words, and to consider the power of how personal narratives provide us better access to understanding the lived experiences of people similar to, and different from, ourselves.

In reflecting on my experience teaching this unit, I recognize a misalignment of where I was (in terms of my goals) when I came into this program and where I am post-student teaching. Prior to entering into my mentor teacher's classroom, I was aghast at how "dry" and focused on literary devices my first semester ELA mentor teacher was. I wanted to talk about big themes, and use fictional texts as a way to help students discover their place in the world. However, once I started teaching, it was quite easy to retreat into the comfort and relative absolution of personal responsibility by just focusing on "what the author had to say". This became a significantly larger crutch when dealing with issues of race, ethnicity, and the ways that society privileges certain peoples' backgrounds.

Not only did focusing on authorial intent provide me with a sort of "comfort zone" in talking about issues of sociopolitical inequities, but it also dominated the types of writing and thought processing that my students were asked to do. Students were asked to dissect the themes of various literary texts, and to make judgements about why the author was including those themes in their texts; this analytical work was a response to

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2:

"Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text" ("Writing", 2018). This was an admittedly limited approach, in that students were only asked to consider what knowledge or claims the authors were attempting to present. Student's reactions to the themes in the texts were not discussed or considered. As students communally analyzed these themes and made judgements about the authors' intent in including those themes, students then wrote short essays in which they followed a pre-established "academic body paragraph" structure. The prompts for these

essays were simply centered on getting students to write about the found themes in an “academic” manner: by making claims about which themes were present in a text, providing textual evidence to support the fact that those themes were present, and then making judgments about the author’s purpose for including those themes in the text, by going back to the text evidence. These writing prompts were created in response to “CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (“Writing, 2018).

While I was incredibly focused on crafting students’ analytical thinking and academic writing abilities, these purposes for reading and writing (as well as the associated standards that they were born out of) were incredibly misaligned with my purposes for entering into the unit, as well as the student thinking outcomes that I hoped to produce in our classroom.

Reframing:

Within this piece of reflective writing, I’ve grappled with the fact that my own fears about how I was perceived by my students made it difficult for me to place my students’ experiences and culturally-influenced perspectives at the center of my curriculum. I’ve also grappled with the fact that while my intentions for entering into the unit were deeply rooted in my goals as a social justice-oriented educator, the types of skills that I tried to build and thought processing that I asked students to engage with were inherently limited, given the potential for teaching towards justice-oriented outcomes. This dilemma was further compounded by my difficulty with answering how tenets of culturally-responsive teaching produce meaningful skills that my students will be able to use in their own lives. However, upon reviewing the ELA Common Core State Standards (CCSS), as well as the Anti-Bias Framework Anchor Standards

(ABFAS), I am realizing that while there is an incongruence between the CCSS and ABFAS in terms of desired outcomes, they are not incompatible.

In retrospect, I was so focused on the “end-goals” that were dictated by Common Core State Standards, specifically in regards to the 11-12 Writing standards, that because I wasn’t able to make a direct connection between the personal work involved in the creation of self-narratives and the ability to write academic analysis papers, that I chose to forego the placement of my students’ cultural perspectives into the teaching of my “American Immigrants & Refugees” unit. I didn’t know how students’ perspectives could create meaningful, tangible outcomes in an academic writing unit, so I didn’t seek to include them.

With that, I’m now realizing that my ideas about the aims of centering students’ culturally-influenced perspectives have been misaligned with the true value of that very work. Culturally-responsive teaching is a “starting point” with which to make students’ culturally-influenced ways of seeing and existing in the world visible in the curriculum, rather than a skill-building paradigm. Just because my process-based outcomes for students in the American Immigrants & Refugees unit centered on doing written textual analysis shouldn’t preclude centering student thought and perspective in our conversations surrounding the thematic content we engage with.

In reviewing the “Reading: Literature” and “Writing” CCSS, it becomes evident that CCSS do not seek to place students’ culturally-influenced perspectives or experiences in conversation with the building of reading skills, and only do so tacitly with any writing skills outcomes. While the CCSS largely reflect the academic-focused “ways of doing school” that I am comfortable with, they do not mandate how students should be taught those skills.

Previously, that lack of explicit inclusion of centering the self in response to interpreting texts

and the building of writing skills made it so that I had difficulty placing tenets of culturally-responsive teaching in conversation with the outcomes I am mandated to teach towards. However, in reviewing the ABFAS, I can now better articulate how CCSS can be used in service of the Anchor Standards that are included in the Anti-Bias Framework.

The Anti-Bias Framework Anchor Standards, via culturally-responsive teaching, can be used as both a starting point for engaging with literature *and* can produce meaningful, justice-oriented outcomes for students. In particular, I'm thinking about Anchor Standard AC.9-12.20: "I will join with diverse people to plan and carry out collective action against exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, and we will be thoughtful and creative in our actions in order to achieve our goals" ("Critical", 2014). The themes of "exclusion, prejudice and discrimination" underpinned the entirety of the American Immigrants & Refugees unit, but because I was so focused on attending to some "Reading: Literature" and "Writing" Common Core State Standards, I never focused on how students' own experiences or culturally-influenced perspectives about these themes could be used to produce any meaningful outcomes in relation to said standards. However, if I were to place the Common Core State Standard CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.10 in service of AC.9-12.20, then I believe that I could leverage students' own culturally-influenced perspectives and experiences to attend to Common Core State Standards *and* produce meaningful justice-oriented outcomes.

The focus of CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.10 is to: "Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences" ("Writing", 2018). While I focused intently on using thematic content related to immigrant and refugee experiences to

produce textual-analysis-focused writing, it is not the only type of writing that can be produced by students, especially at the 12th grade level.

Instead of simply focusing on writing about how authors use thematic content to make points about the plight of American immigrants and refugees, I can engage in culturally-responsive pedagogical strategies that ask students to center their own experiences or perspectives on the immigrant and refugee experience, and then place those experiences and perspectives at the center of writing tasks that attempt to create justice-oriented outcomes. If I were to teach students how to produce writing in a number of various genres that dealt with the themes of immigrant and refugee experiences in educational settings, students would be enabled to place their own perspectives and viewpoints at the center of those writing activities. In addition to the opportunity to allow students' previous knowledge and skills to shine in their preferred styles of writing, students would also build skills in making targeted rhetorical decisions to express (and re-shape) their culturally-influenced perspectives for a number of differentiated writing purposes.

Given that the Anti-Bias Framework's AC.9-12.20 is focused on leveraging a collaborative spirit amongst diverse people to "be thoughtful and creative in our actions in order to achieve our goals" of pushing against "exclusion, prejudice and discrimination", centering students' culturally-influenced perspectives and experiences would be crucial in building that collaborative spirit ("Critical", 2014). Students would be asked to draw on one another's experiences, viewpoints, and ways of seeing the world in order to weigh the ways that exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination are enacted in our various communities. Then, the teaching and producing of a host of writing projects (such as narrative writing, poetry, expository writing, research papers with policy recommendations, argumentative essays with a focus on

implementing rhetorical strategies) can be used as a method with which to both attend to the writing standards included in Common Core State Standards, *and* serve as creative products that can be geared towards justice-oriented outcomes.

In writing this account of my growth in understanding how utilizing culturally-responsive pedagogical strategies to align state standard learning outcomes to achieve justice-oriented creations in my classroom, I've discovered that I must also work to build my own skills in moving from self-focused education to a place in which I can support minoritized communities in fighting for justice. In reviewing Bobbie Harro's "Cycle of Liberation" framework, I've realized that the work I've done to understand how social inequities are developed and sustained has largely existed in the "Getting Ready" phase of the "Cycle of Liberation." As a student, I've "[developed] analysis and tools"; on a personal level, I've engaged in introspection and have attempted to raise my consciousness about the role that I play in perpetuating social inequities (Harro, 2000). However, this has all been personal work that has had no real impact on the communities that I wish to partner with to end social inequities.

In turn, my teaching of the "American Immigrants & Refugees" also focused on teaching my students a portion of skills identified in the "Getting Ready" phase of the "Cycle of Liberation"; namely, the development of analytical skills and tools to better understand narratives of disenfranchisement experienced by newcomers to the United States. While exposure to these narratives (as well as exposure to the global political context that I included in framing the unit) might have educated some students about the plight of immigrants and refugees in America, I'm left thinking about the fact that I did not enable students to engage in any introspective work that would allow them to center and interrogate their own culturally-influenced perspectives about the thematic content we were engaging with.

Without centering students' perspectives, they were simply exposed to fictional stories that included thematic content that they may or may not have related to. By only exposing students to these narratives and themes, nothing inherently productive was accomplished. Students were simply shown fictional examples of scenarios that they had likely heard of or witnessed before: marginalized people being further marginalized in educational spaces; Americans not valuing linguistic diversity; newcomers to America being "othered" while attempting to negotiate one's identity amidst the throes of the politics of assimilation. Exposure to these fictional accounts only goes so far if the work to reimagine a society that is culturally inclusive is not begun in the classroom.

In turn, doing this introspective work is crucial for my students so that we are not stuck in a limitedly-productive educational space where exposure to harrowing narratives is the end-game. Instead, I need to enable my students to center their voices within the curricular content so that we can produce justice-oriented outcomes. I believe that moving students towards these justice-oriented outcomes, all while building the thinking and writing skills that are mandated by CCSS, is aligned with the forward movement proposed by Harro's "Cycle of Liberation." I'm thinking especially about how students, through the analysis of language and production of critical, creative, and research-driven writing tasks, can enter into the "Reaching Out" phase of the "Cycle of Liberation." The "Reaching Out" phase includes "using tools", which my students will build in their multitude of writing tasks; it includes "speaking out and naming injustices", which my students will do by interrogating and reframing the language that we use to talk about social inequities, particularly how that language is shaped by sociopolitical power dynamics (Harro, 2000).

Additionally, the work of “exploring and experimenting” that is a part of the “Reaching Out” phase is uniquely suited to the English Language Arts discipline, as students can explore and experiment with language to create fictional texts that draw on their own culturally-influenced perspectives and experiences (Harro, 2000). These writing products can be used to both center students’ cultural perspectives about injustices and inequities *and* initiate “movement out of self toward others”: students will craft narratives, characters, and plots that both speak to the effects of social inequities while also asking them to write from a place where their own culturally-influenced perspectives are foundational to the texts that they write, but will also ask them to occupy an authorial space that explores the lived experiences of others (Harro, 2000).

This work to align Common Core State Standards learning outcomes with Anti-Bias Framework Anchor Standards has better enabled me understand how culturally-responsive pedagogical strategies can be foundational to the ELA discipline. Furthermore, working with my students towards the production of justice-oriented outcomes enables me view CCSS as a vehicle to move students through their uniquely personal “Cycle of Liberation”. While I still have work to do in figuring out how this alignment of CCSS, Anti-Bias Anchor Framework Standards, and the “Cycle of Liberation” aligns with the curriculums that I will be asked to teach in my future classrooms, I feel invigorated and inspired by better understanding how culturally-responsive teaching can be used not only as a better “entry point” for students, but can also be central to engaging in the work of creating social justice.

With that, I am also realizing that I have lots of work to do outside of the classroom if I expect to be able to lead my students in producing justice-oriented outcomes through their coursework. In reflecting upon where I exist in Barro’s “Cycle of Liberation”, I recognize that I

have been perpetually stuck in the beginning phases of the “Cycle of Liberation.” I have “woken up”; I have “gotten ready”; but I have not “reached out” or built community that makes any tangible differences in the lives of those most affected by social inequities. I have told myself that I am helping to solve societal problems by teaching youth, but in a sense that narrative acts as an excuse for not taking responsibility for taking action against injustices in my own life. Through writing this paper, I have realized that I must intentionally move through my own “Cycle of Liberation” if I truly want to walk the walk. How I will do that will likely be a years-long process, but I look forward to that process, as I believe that my students will benefit most from learning alongside a teacher who works towards justice-oriented outcomes outside of the classroom. This direct engagement with working through my own “Cycle of Liberation” will undoubtedly better equip me to work alongside my students in working towards justice-oriented outcomes in their educational lives.

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