A TEACHERS' TOOL FOR MINIMIZING THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF LEARNING DISABILITY LABELING ON STUDENTS OF COLOR

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About the Centers

Great Lakes Equity Center (Center) is an educational research and service center located in Indiana University's School of Education at IUPUI. The Center engages in equity-focused technical assistance and related research with educational and community agencies focused on systemic improvements to serve all learners with particular focus on educational access, participation and outcomes for those who have been historically marginalized. As the Center's largest project, the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP Center) is one of four regional Equity Assistance Centers, funded by the United States Department of Education under Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The MAP Center provides technical assistance and training to public school districts and other responsible governmental agencies upon request, in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion desegregation, integration, and equitable educational opportunities.

Companion Resources

This teacher critical emotion praxis companion tool is meant to be used with the following resources on the social and emotional impact of Learning Disability (LD) labeling for students of Color:

1. *Re-framing Master Narratives of Dis/ability through an Affective Lens: Sophia Cruz's LD Story at Her Intersections* (Hernández-Saca, 2019)

1. *The Intersections of Learning Dis/ability, Ethnicity, and Emotionality in Education: The Voice of Sophia Cruz* (Hernández-Saca, 2020)

About This Tool

This *Equity Tool* is meant to help teachers to critically think about their own beliefs, thoughts, feelings, language, and ideas regarding Latinx students with LDs, and their students' social and emotional well-being and sense of self. In other words, this tool informs their critical emotion praxis about this educational topic. Critical emotion praxis is ongoing and influences future actions in the service of ALL students (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007), and particularly for historically multiply marginalized youth at their intersections of power and identity across domains of teacher actions in schools.

Please refer to the key terms list on pp. 11-13 of this companion tool for their definitions.

Sophia Cruz's narrative (Hernández-Saca, 2019, 2020) raises the following critical emotion praxis reflection questions:

1. How do teachers *define and talk* about their students of Color with LDs?
2. What *expectations* do teachers have of their students of Color with LDs?
3. How do teachers plan their **curriculum** and **assessment** with an asset approach for students of Color with LDs?
4. What kinds of **recognition** and **support** do teachers create for students of Color with LDs?
5. How do teachers *communicate* with their students of Color with LDs across all of these areas above?

[Image description: Elementary-aged feminine-presenting student of Color doing classwork with their teacher.]

These technical questions are related to the contextual (e.g., people and students in the school, local and global histories, current events, etc.) and critical aspects (e.g., issues of power, privilege, difference, social justice, emotionalities, etc.) of educational practice. That is why it is important to be aware of what theoretical model of dis/ability is informing our practices.

Models of Dis/ability at the Intersections of Power and Identities
Similar to the two resources listed above, this tool uses an interdisciplinary and Disability Studies in Education approach. That is, it foregrounds the psycho-emotional disablism model of dis/ability (Thomas, 1999, 2007) rather than a medical model of dis/ability:

♦ **A medical model** centers the social and emotional issues that students of Color with Learning Disabilities have as something to "find," "locate," "intervene in," "control," and "fix" from within their minds, bodies, and biologies.

- **A psycho-emotional disablism model** centers the social and emotional dimensions of having an LD as socially, culturally, emotionally, politically and historically constructed within school contexts and within the relationships they have with others and society. Thomas (2007) defined the psycho-emotional model of dis/ability as "a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being" (p. 73).

    ⇒ **Intersectional Disablism.** Based on a qualitative research synthesis, Iqtadar, Hernández-Saca, and Ellison (2020) found that historically and multiply marginalized youth with disabilities at the intersections of race, gender, class, and other forms of difference resist labels of dis/ability in schools, given systematic oppression in educational systems. Iqtadar et al. (2020) also found that students saw dis/ability labels at the intersections of identities in school as *an assigned identity* external to themselves, which also *led to limited educational opportunities,* and, like Sophia, left *negative psychological and emotional impacts on their well-being and sense of self*. However, students, like Sophia engaged in multiple acts of resistance against stereotypes and master narratives (Bamberg, 2004) about not only their dis/ability, but also their race, gender, class, among other intersectional identities.

[Image description: High school-aged masculine-presenting student of Color sitting in a wheelchair, holding folders.]

It is of critical importance for general and special education teachers and all educational actors to engage in critical emotion praxis reflection about the social and emotional dimensions of Learning Disabilities in order to create new knowledge and develop a critical consciousness—conscientization or conscientização (Freire, 1973). Through conscientização teachers and other educational actors can inform their educational practices before they act or communicate with students of Color with LD. The term 'critical,' within this tool, is grounded in critical theory, pedagogy and literacy (Coffey, 2010; Freire, 1972, 1973; Freund, 1985; Ingram & Simon-Ingram, 1992), with particular attention to the role of emotions, feelings, and affects in the social construction of educational reality towards equity and justice (Freund, 1985; Ingram & Simon-Ingram, 1992).

Critical theory is the study of society and its forms of inequities that dehumanize and in turn oppress human beings' agency—their ability to act within their sociocultural environments towards liberation, freedom, equity and justice (Ahearn, 2001). Freire's (1972) educational theory asked us to engage in dialogue with the oppressed through a problem-posing approach, in the co-construction of new knowledge.

Critical pedagogy is grounded in critical theory in order to both engage in a cultural-historical process of critically interpreting and re-writing one's world socially, culturally, politically, historically, emotionally, and psychologically in order to transform one's self and the world (Freire, 1972). In turn, through critical pedagogy and critical theory, one engages in critical literacy.

Within this tool, critical literacy theory centers "on the relationships between language, power, social practice, and access to social goods and services, there are numerous methods of engaging students in becoming critical members of their society" (Coffey, 2010, para. 12). This is of critical importance for students of Color labeled with LD since we cannot divorce educational systems from a cultural-historical commitment to socially and emotionally just and equitable social learning processes.

The following set of critical emotion reflection questions are meant to be approached with a sense of vulnerability and open-mindedness to explore your thoughts, beliefs, and language, in order to investigate unexamined ideas about students of Color with LD and their education. Possible answers to these questions could be ideas that you have always thought about regarding your approach to students of Color with LDs, or new ways that you have never thought about. The purpose for this *Equity Tool* is to add to your current tool kit of educational practices, so that they can inform your future equity-

oriented commitment to your students of Color with LDs. After reviewing the two resources suggested as companions to this tool, some answers to the following questions could include:

1. **What is a disability?** A disability is an impairment that students have, however, due to the intersectional disablism model of disability, this model centers the importance of disrupting that definition, since it would not account for the role of power and privilege, and/or a racist and ableist environment that would impair the ability to act of students of Color with LD.

[Image description: Elementary-aged feminine-presenting student of Color doing sign language with an adult.]

2. **How would you critically define expectations?** Expectations are culturally and socially agreed upon value systems that inform our behaviors, and motivate students to learn and grow intrinsically.

3. **What is the curriculum?** Curriculum is not only books, material, and content, but also the ways in which we interact together, value, and socially organize in order to learn and grow. In other words, from a critical approach the curriculum is the sociocultural value system that is directly and indirectly socialized within our students.

4. **What is assessment?** Assessments are the tools through which teachers evaluate student growth and learning. Through assessment, teachers influence the identity development of all students, and in turn, structure students' performance within educational contexts (Kozleski & Atkinson, 2014).

5. **It is very important to be explicit and plan for recognitions and supports** for students of Color with LDs, so that the most enabling environment is built for students to be successful. For example, using one or more of following Critical Race Theory of LatCrit (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) tenets alongside Universal Design for Learning principles (e.g., multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression and multiple means of engagement) can be generative of transforming our consciousness towards equitable practices for students of Color and/or students of Color with LD:

a. The centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination
b. The challenge to dominant ideology
c. The commitment to social justice
d. The centrality of experiential knowledge
e. The transdisciplinary perspective

In so doing, we account for the salience of race and ethnicity in society within learning contexts. We can no longer only provide learning contexts that affords tools of technical aspects, but they must also provide social and emotional justice understandings, in order to mediate the environment. In so doing, we will fight white and ability supremacy in education for students of Color with and without LD.

6. One way of approaching our **communication** with students of Color with LDs and their families across all of these above areas is to go beyond the *technical* (e.g., the current policies and practices such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Every Student Succeeds Act, etc.) dimensions of these teaching and learning dimensions, in order to account for the *contextual* (e.g., people and students in the school, local and global histories, current events, etc.) and *critical* (e.g., issues of power, privilege, difference, social justice, emotionalities, etc.) components of educational practice. How we make sense of these traditional domains so that they are reframed or informed by critical theories is of paramount importance for the moment-to-moment interactions we have with ourselves, each other, and within our personal and professional lives for equity and justice sake.

Teacher Critical Emotion Praxis Reflection Questions for Equity and Justice

1. How do you ***define and talk*** about their students of Color with LDs?
   a. What is a <u>disability</u>? What is <u>learning</u>? What are <u>Learning Disabilities</u>? What are your beliefs about students of Color? What are your beliefs about students of Color with the educational label LD?
   b. How do your answers and beliefs to the above questions inform your interactions with yourself, teachers, staff, and students?
   c. <u>What is the role of student voice (e.g., perspectives, opinions, feelings, thoughts) in your beliefs about students of Color labeled with LDs?</u>

[Image description: Elementary-aged feminine-presenting child of Color drawing with colored pencils]

2. What ***expectations*** do you have about your students of Color with LDs?
   a. <u>How would you critically define expectations? How would you critically define teacher expectations?</u>
   b. What is the role and impact of your expectations in general and special education? What is the role and impact of your expectations for students of Color? <u>What is the role and impact of your expectations for students of Color with LDs?</u>
   c. What is the relationship between your expectations and student success? What is the relationship between your expectations and <u>student voice</u>? What is the relationship between your expectations and students of Color with LDs? What is the relationship between your expectations and the social and emotional well-being of students of Color with LDs and their positive sense of academic self?

3. How do you plan your ***curriculum*** and ***assessment*** with an asset approach for students of Color with LDs?
   a. <u>What is the curriculum?</u> Who creates the curriculum? Who benefits? Who doesn't? <u>What is assessment?</u> Who creates your assessments? Who benefits? Who doesn't? What is the role of assessment and curriculum in your teaching and learning activities that you design for all your students, but in particular, for your students of Color with LDs?

    b. **What currently critically informs your practice regarding your curriculum and assessment?** What does this sound like, feel like, and look like? In particular, what does this sound like, feel like, and look like, for students of Color with LDs?

    c. **How is intersectional disability critically understood in your classroom curriculum?** How is learning critically understood and practiced in your curriculum? How is learning and disability critically approached in your assessments for all your students, but in particular for students of Color with LDs?

4. What kinds of critical **recognition** and **support** do you create for students of Color with LDs?

    a. What kinds of critical recognitions and supports are built or you would like to see built into your curriculum and assessment for students of Color with LDs?

    b. How is disability and ability or LD at the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and/or other forms of difference represented in your curriculum and assessment?

    c. How do you conceptualize your students' present level of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) statement, which describes the skills and abilities based on initial and ongoing special education evaluation and assessments, for students of Color with LDs within your class and their other classes and education programming as outlined within their Individual Education Programs (IEPs).

5. How do you critically ***communicate*** with your students of Color with LDs and their families across all of these areas above?

    a. **What is your communication in relationship to students of Color with LD and their education?** How do you best communicate? How do your individual students of Color with LDs communicate? Describe your communication style with your students in general, and in particular, with your students of Color with LDs and their families.

    b. **What are emotions in relationship to students of Color with LD and their education?** How were emotions, feelings, and affects being defined in the two resources? How would you define emotions, feelings, and affects? **How would the way you defined your emotions, feelings, and affects inform how you understand your students of Color with LD?** Describe your emotions, feelings, and affect with yourself, your students in general, and in particular

for your students of Color with LD, and their families.

c. How do the answers and reflections to the first two set of questions within this fourth domain of questions inform your communication with students of Color with LDs and their families? Lastly, how does your communication with your students of Color labeled with LDs help to disrupt the sociological phenomena in schools that Sophia Cruz experienced related to her being labeled with an LD and the idea of LD:

i. **The hegemony of smartness** or the false and oppressive belief, that due to her LD, accompanying label and being in special education, she was "not smart" compared to her non-labeled peers.

ii. **Disability microaggressions** in and around school settings, which impacted her psychological and emotional well-being.

iii. *LD as a double-edge sword*, or both positive and negative, and *"LDness"* as carrying more than one meaning. Sophia's prominent view of *LD was the image of a slow learner.*

[Image description: Middle-school aged, masculine-presenting student of Color sitting in a wheelchair at a laptop.]

Using the **critical emotion praxis reflection questions** above, you can journal about their own beliefs and practices, and then come up with an **Action Plan** that includes **SMART goals** to improve your critical emotion praxis for students of Color with LDs at their intersections of power and identities. This is critical, given teachers have been trained historically to ignore the role of race, ethnicity and other forms of difference such as disability and emotions, feelings and affects, in the dimensions of the social and emotional well-being of LD (Hernández-Saca, 2019, Matias, & Zembylas, 2014).

Teacher Critical Emotion Praxis Action Plans through SMART Goals

Specific = Objectives should be concrete and easily defined. Ask why, when, where, who, what, and how this objective will be accomplished.

Measurable = Learners should be able to quantify whether or not they meet their objectives, either in numbers or by comparison. Has something been done that will show that a change has occurred ?

Attainable = Have smaller objectives to complete first. Make small goals add up to a larger goal, making it more attainable.

Relevant = How realistic or relevant are the objectives based on the resources readily available? Are the objectives relevant to the topic?

Timely = Make a deadline. By WHEN should the objective be accomplished? (Persky, 2012, pp. 31-32)

Key Terms

A Medical Model of Dis/ability = is the dominant way of understanding both disability and ability with society, historically and culturally, that places *dis/ability* within the body, mind and the assumption is that *dis/ability* is a biological and neuropsychological entity and something to find, control, fix, remediate, and intervene in for the benefit of the individual and society.

A Psycho-emotional Disablism Model of Dis/ability = this model of *dis/ability* bridges both models of disability—the medical-psychological model of disability and the social model of disability to understand the experiences of people with disabilities as involving both internal and external social process that can restrict their ability to be self -determined or act. Thomas (2007) defined the psycho-emotional model of disability as "a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being" (p. 73).

Agency = the ability to act within one's social and cultural environment.

- assume competence and reject deficit models of disability (Connor, 2012, para. 2)
- contextualize disability within political and social spheres

Critical Consciousness or Conscientization or Conscientização = the educational and social process through which one's social, historical, political and economic situation is unveiled to resist dominant ideology that positions people at the intersections of race, class, gender, sex, sexual orientation, citizenship, language, and other forms of social and political differences that may lead to oppression. Through this unveiling the people take action to change their situation for liberation, freedom, and greater equity within society.

Critical Emotion Praxis = is both critical thinking and feeling before we act within educational contexts towards inclusion of all people and students. This process entails the technical (e.g., the current policies and practices such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Every Student Succeeds Act, etc.), contextual (e.g., people and students in the school, local and global histories, current events, etc.) and critical (e.g., issues of power, privilege, difference, social justice, emotionalities, etc.) dimensions of praxis.

Critical Literacy = is the process of understanding "the relationships between language, power, social practice, and access to social goods and services, there are numerous methods of engaging students in becoming critical members of their society" (Coffey, 2010, para. 12).

Critical Pedagogy = is grounded in critical theory in order to both engage in a cultural -historical process of critically interpreting and re-writing one's world socially, culturally, politically, historically, and psychologically in order to transform one's self and the world (Freire, 1972).

Critical Theory = is the study of society's inequalities and inequities along markers of identities and power relationships and deals with the philosophical topics such as freedom, equity, liberation, justice, equality regarding human oppression.

Dis/ability Macroaggression = are subtle verbal interactional and interpersonal insults about one's ability and so they are a form of ableism—discrimination based on one's disability and in turn is a form of violence, which impact youth and people with disability's psychological and emotional well-being.

Dis/ability Studies in Education = is a critical theory of the study of disability in both society and education. The mission statement of DSE is "to promote the understanding of disability from a social model perspective drawing on social, cultural, historical, discursive, philosophical, literary, aesthetic, artistic, and other traditions to challenge medical, scientific, and psychological models of disability as they relate to education" (Connor, 2012, para. 1).

Educational Theory = are models that may explain and predict educational phenomena in a generative way in order to create new knowledge for theory, research, practice and praxis.

Historically Multiply Marginalized = used as an alternative to the *minority* or *majority* binary, denoting or relating to people and students who have been oppressed due to their multidimensional and intersecting identities such as their race, class, gender, dis/Ability and other markers of difference.

Interdisciplinary = is a form of social science inquiry that includes more than one disciplinary tools of theory, research, and practice, in order to investigate social issues.

Intersectional Disablism = is a form of psycho-emotional disability oppression that is socially and emotionally engendered due to the salience of race, gender, class, sexual orientation and other forms of differences.

Latinx = a gender-neutral alternative to Latina or Latino denoting of or relating to Latin American heritage.

Learning Dis/ability = is "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do

mathematical calculations" (IDEA, 2004). However, please note that this is the institutionalized and deficit medical model of what counts as *learning disability*.

Master Narratives = are personal and professional pre-existent forms of understanding who individual subjects are, that both constrain and afford their sociocultural interpretation strategies agency in social institutions and who they become and influence their personal narrative of their self.

Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance = is a summary of a student's functional performance and academic achievement for ages 13-21. The academic achievement within the state of Iowa or your state describes how the student is doing in the state core curriculum and other state standards, like the Early Learning Standards in Iowa. The functional performance may include the students' ability to apply academic skills in a variety of ways or settings. These skills would be needed in order to live in society for communication, mobility around community, personal hygiene, living independently, among others (Iowa Department of Education, 2020).

- privilege the interest, agendas, and voices of people labeled with disability/ disabled people

Problem-Posing Approach = this approach was first written within Paulo Freire's, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as the resolution to the narrative problem within education that led to the Banking-model of Education. The banking model understands students as empty vessels who are filled with knowledge, versus the problem-posing approach centers dialogue and critical praxis—reflection and action cycles, in order to change one's self and the world, through engaging with the oppressed about the topics related to their life as part and parcel of the curriculum. These topics Freire (1972) called situated themes, in order to create new knowledge about their social, cultural, political and historical lives. In so doing, teachers enter into their students social and emotional worlds, in order to re-think and re-feel them for individual and societal transform through the act of questioning the ideological and political nature of their situations.

- promote social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labeled with disability/disabled people

The Hegemony of Smartness = is the false and oppressive belief that people are divided into those who are *smart* and those who are *not smart*. Within the experience of dis/ability, students or people with dis/abilities are positioned as *not smart*, while those not labeled with a dis/ability are *smart*.

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