

Dynamics of Difference and Sameness: Teachers' Reflections on Diversity in Their Classrooms

Chapter Four

- I. What We Mean by Dynamics of Difference and Sameness
- II. The Dynamics of Difference and Sameness in the Voices of Teachers
- III. Conclusion: How Will Diversity Issues Play Out in Your Classroom?

I. What We Mean by Dynamics of Difference and Sameness

“Dynamics of difference and sameness” is a phrase we use to refer to the complex—often unspoken or even unrealized—dynamics of power or bias that can arise in any human interaction. Many new teachers discover that a classroom is a crucible for such dynamics. When a White teacher walks into a room of mostly Latino students, what hidden and not-so-hidden dynamics are at play? What dynamics surface if the teacher herself is Latino? Or male? Or gay? Or blind? What dynamics of difference and sameness might arise if a corps member is returning to his old neighborhood to teach? What if she is instead teaching in a community that she has never experienced?

Additional Reading

After reading this chapter, please read the following selection found on the Institute Info Center within TFANet:

- “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children.” by Lisa Delpit, from her book *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*

The process of posing and discussing these questions about our classrooms will unearth critical answers about our own, our students’, and our colleagues’ perspectives and motivations. In many cases, such reflections will greatly enhance our self-awareness, providing surprising insights into our thoughts and behavior. What dynamics did we expect to arise? Why? In what ways were we right and wrong, and why? How could those assumptions impact our choices and actions at school?

This chapter is somewhat different from the others in that rather than progress through an incremental outline of structured ideas, it simply presents a range of reflections from corps members themselves. We hope that you will take the time to consider the ways in which you do and do not identify with, expect yourself to connect to, and appreciate the reflections of the teachers below. These reflections will serve as deep background for all of the following, more traditionally structured chapters designed to build your diversity-related knowledge base. Many, many thanks to Michelle, Justin, Kristy, Dan, Rich, Mona, Eric, Camika, John, and Tracy for sharing these personal reflections with us.

II. The Dynamics of Difference and Sameness in the Voices of Teachers

Precisely because discussions of “dynamics of difference and sameness” are so personal and question-laden, we believe the most effective means of spurring your own thinking about these matters is to ask you to share in the reflections of a number of other teachers who have been kind enough to make transparent their own thoughts about diversity-related dynamics in their classroom.

No matter what your background and identities, as you enter your classrooms this summer and this fall, you are likely to encounter dynamics of difference and sameness in ways that you may not have before. While you read these, consider carefully what experiences, thoughts, and feelings you identify with and are surprised by. What do you think your OWN written reflection would say after a few weeks of school?

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Michelle Koyama, Rio Grande Valley '97. I identify as a multi-ethnic female; however, I am predominately Mexican-American and grew up within this culture in Colorado. My placement was the Rio Grande Valley, and I knew I had to be cautious with any assumptions I had about feeling "connected" to the Mexican-American culture, especially in South Texas. I knew my new community would view me with caution, especially since I have a Japanese last name, and at first glance appear "White" to most people.

At the beginning of my teaching experience, I guess I wanted my school community to accept me and trust me sooner. At times I almost wanted to scream out to my new community that I grew up with similar traditions and practices, and that even though I could not speak Spanish, my family in Colorado did - they just never taught me. But one day I came to the realization that with time, and with trust established by staying and living in my school community, these conversations would happen. Eventually they did happen. I did not have to prove my cultural background to anyone. I had to prove I was dedicated to my students and their success.

Justin May, Greater New Orleans '00. During my first year of teaching, before Thanksgiving, my principal called me into her office. I remember the conversation as something like this:

"Mr. May, you know why I called you in here right?"

"Not really, what's going on?"

"Mr. May, you're not the person I hired. I hired a creative, passionate teacher. I want to see your creativity and your caring for your students! I want to see the puppet shows you showed me [I did a lot of puppet shows at the Teach For America Summer Training Institute]. I want to see radio shows. If you don't get it together soon you need to leave and go do something else. Your students deserve better than what you are giving them."

I remember my complete bewilderment: "My students deserve better? Do something else?" I began to panic. My principal was completely right! I was a monster in my classroom. I realize now that my principal's concerns were valid, and that my actions were rooted in my fear of my students and my community.

I started frantically looking for resources that would help me improve. I went to master teachers, I went to the public library, I went to workshops, I talked to friends, I sent off e-mails to teachers, I went to conferences, and I spoke with my Teach For America staff. In order to process these ideas and reflect aggressively upon my practice I developed a daily routine of tape-recording myself, running, meditating, and writing. My transformation as a teacher took several months. My thinking changed from a focus on my fears to a focus on strategies. I wanted to create a classroom that I would feel excited about sending my children to, more importantly, I wanted to create a community that all children wanted to be in.

In the fall I had been placed by TFA as a third grade teacher at William J. Guste Elementary School. The school I worked in had no windows, no air conditioning, and no copier. We had very few supplies or books. Guste was in the middle of the housing projects in New Orleans, where the student population was 100% African-American. I had never before been the minority. There were over four hundred children and over forty staff members in our school. I was the only White male, and one of only 4 White staff members. All of these factors increased my level of discomfort...I just didn't fit in here!

I had mistakenly thought that I could master this fear by dominating the classroom and by forcing kids to behave. I struggled more than I ever had in my life on my first day of teaching, and every day after that for several months! Students that were exceptionally angry at me would scream:

“Your WHITE self...HUH!” As if being White was enough of an insult to make one jump from the second story balcony. Having students call attention to my skin color made me realize that I hadn’t dealt directly with the differences between my students and myself. It also made me realize that I hadn’t set up a learning community that felt comfortable talking about these differences.

Kristy Marshall, Phoenix ’98. I have a physical difference. I was born with Poland’s Syndrome and as a result my right hand did not fully develop in my mother’s womb. As a child, I had no idea I was different until I encountered a world that did not know how to ‘treat’ people who were physically or mentally different from what society deems as the ‘norm’. One of my many reasons for joining TFA was to ensure that regardless of one’s difference, every child has the same opportunities.

I taught first grade English as a Second Language. I vividly recall preparing for my first day, daunted by the thought of how students would react to my hand. Goodness, I was 21 years old and still succumbed to the pressure of image and beauty as defined by our society. Looking back, I cannot believe that I was ‘worried’ about what six-year-olds would think, say, or do for that matter. I walked into my classroom the first day of school with my #1 classroom management tool that was going to work: I introduced myself and gave each of them a chance to meet/greet each other. I then went on to explain and model how they would know it was time to ‘stop, look, and listen’. I clapped twice and told them to repeat after me. At that moment, I looked at the class and each of them had one fist (modeling my withered right hand) and one hand clapping back at me. My teaching moment began right there. However, it was not their lesson but my lesson.

You see, my entire life I took each child’s actions/words (from when I was growing up) to me personally, as children do. I let those children I encountered define how other children and people would perceive my difference. On the other hand, as an adult, I realized that my students were merely modeling their teacher. At this very instance, I realized the ‘innocence’ of a child and, in reality, humanity. You see, I understood that every single child who scoffed at me, ridiculed me, etc. did not know any better. They had never seen anyone with a hand like mine, and more importantly, no one taught them how to ‘treat’ people and moreover, approach people who are ‘different’ than them. As a classroom teacher with or without a hand, the students saw me for me.

Violence and bullying is prevalent in our schools, and often, I received the brunt of it growing up. Yet, in my classroom, there was no bullying, violence, hatred, or even an “I can’t,” because being different was okay in room 17. Teachers need to teach their students that difference, diversity, and uniqueness are welcomed and encouraged. Open dialogue needs to occur, and students should feel comfortable asking people who are not like them questions to further educate themselves. As a White corps member—even a White woman—I could never, and will never, understand personally what it feels like to grow up in our society as a minority in terms of race, yet I have a responsibility to educate myself on the perspective of a Black person by asking questions and generating conversations about race. I was a minority in some sense, and in my classroom if my students were curious about someone or something, they asked. Violence, bullying, and hatred will only be prevented in our schools if students feel comfortable asking questions and sharing their feelings with each other.

Dan Konecky, Greater New Orleans ’98. Difference and sameness were major issues for me when I left liberal California and moved down south to teach high school in New Orleans. As a White person, I’m used to thinking of myself as an individual. I’m not used to being part of a group, except for

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groups of my own choosing. I'm never been held accountable for any misdeed that someone who shares my pigment commits. That's why realizing that I am part of a group, that my student's perception of me was rooted in a larger perception of White people, was such an intense revelation.

The past is never dead. It's not even past. New Orleans will let you know.

Not long after finding an apartment, I went out to get a haircut. I walked down my nice street to the dilapidated Boulevard a few blocks away. There's a barbershop on the corner of Broad and Dumaine. I wanted to build those relationships; I wanted to be a part of the community. So I entered and sat down.

You would have thought that my arrival meant the end of the world the way the barber and the few patrons that were in the place were staring at me. The barber told me they were closed and they couldn't cut my hair. I got the message and I left as other customers, with considerably more melanin in their skin, walked in and sat down to wait.

I taught on the west bank in New Orleans. A White faculty member, also a first-year teacher, told me his uncle was a barber. My hair was getting unruly so I went to his Uncle's shop. The man cut my hair, the whole time talking to me about the problems with Black people. He stopped at the appropriate spaces, waiting for me to validate his southern drawl with an "um hmmm" or a "yes indeed." He kept telling me to be still in the chair. I had to just sit there and take it.

Why is he talking to me like this?
Who does he think I am?

Sameness in New Orleans put me in a group with some people whose views often made me want to scream. Sometimes it was flagrant. Other times it was soft. In our teacher's lounge, White folks sat around the big long table and the Black teachers sat around the smaller circular table. The air in that lounge was thick. Where I wanted to sit, and where I was 'supposed' to sit did not always jive with each other. When I asked another teacher in confidence about the default seating chart, he just laughed it off. "No big deal" he told me. "We got bigger fish to fry."

It was a big deal to me. I was prepared to be different from my students. In fact, I was excited about its prospect. However, I was not prepared for the sameness that I shared with other White people, and the conclusions that are made based on that shared identity. I was not prepared to be perceived by my students in that light. Placing myself within history's context, as opposed to someone floating above its sphere of influence, helped me to connect to my adopted city, to my students, and to my own concept of who I am. It takes a concerted, conscious effort to blow against the wind. For me, as a White man, realizing that there was a wind to blow against—in regards to my own identity, was a major step in that direction.

Richard Reddick, Houston '95. I made a lot of assumptions about teaching in Fifth Ward. Because it looked a little like the neighborhood in which I went to school, I assumed that I would have a level of familiarity with my students and their parents that would prove beneficial in building relationships with them. It turns out that I was both right and wrong--some of my parents' faces lit up when I met them, and on several occasions I would hear them say how happy they were to see that their child had a positive Black male role model in their lives. Connecting with my students on cultural commonalities--food, music, and even our vocabulary--was another positive manifestation of our bond.

On the other hand, my students had only seen Black men in three incarnations in their school experience: the principal, the coaches, and the custodial staff. (The other Black male teachers were in the middle school or behavioral adjustment classes.) We certainly went through a testing period where the students would call me "Miss" (sometimes mistakenly; other times, not). There was a constant conversation about their assumptions about me: yes, I enjoyed basketball, but I wasn't particularly good at it. No, I was not replacing Mr. Johnson as principal-- ties and slacks are business dress for men. The coaches wear tracksuits, and the custodians wear uniforms because those outfits are appropriate for their jobs.

There were experiences that I will relive forever--spending time with the eighth grade boys and talking about life, school, sports, and women, all the while trying to impart a sense of responsibility, duty, and service to them. There are other moments that I reflect upon with regret--Katie, my most challenging (and most memorable) student in my first year. Katie and I had really come to an understanding. She had been through unspeakable abuse as a child, and was living with her grandmother and cousins in a fairly stable environment, which really allowed her to grow in confidence and do well academically. I was so inspired by her effort that I promised to take Katie and three other students to Hermann Park for a TFA fun day. As I drove up to Katie's house, several of the cousins eyed me suspiciously. Her grandmother (with whom I had obtained permission for this trip) wasn't home, and here I was, a man dressed in sport clothes, asking to take their cousin to the park. It was clear that they did not believe that I was a teacher, or that my intent was to simply take Katie to the park as a reward for her behavior. I still cringe when I think about talking to Katie on Monday about the broken promise.

One of the things that initially bothered me was the fact that the students would often laugh at me when I spoke to them. When I asked them why, they'd respond, "You sound like a White person." Over time, though, I learned to ask what about my voice reminded them of a White person. Sometimes they would say it was the way I pronounced words; other times they would say it was because I sounded "proper." A rumor started up that I was also a minister, because someone heard me using words as a preacher did. I played some of my students a tape of a Malcolm X speech once, and remember one of the kids yelling out, "That's a White man talking!" Helping the students to understand that there is a diversity of dress, opinion, athletic prowess, and intellectual acuity among Black people was one of the most rewarding aspects of my experience in Fifth Ward.

Some of the research I do now as a doctoral student analyzes the differing social adaptations that poor, working-class, and affluent Black families manifest. One thing I've discovered is that social class strongly conditions how one perceives and interacts with the world--as my mentor Charles Willie often says, "A Black family is not simply a Black family." Affluent families may subscribe to the "American dream" ideal of hard work being the path to success, while a poor family, having the results of their hard work thwarted by racism and economic calamity, sees the "American dream" as a set of unfair rules for success that have rarely worked in their favor. For instance, some parents saw me as an extension of the social service system, which alternately threatened and wagged a nagging finger at them, and were defensive in their interactions with me. My ethnicity was of little help then--if anything, I think I was perceived as a "sellout."

One thing was clear--once I had established the understanding that my expectations were high for *all* my students, virtually all of the parents supported my efforts. Teaching in a community in which you share the same, or a similar ethnic or racial background as your students can be alternately comfortable and challenging. But I would advise you to prepare to have your assumptions and hunches often turned upside down.

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Mona Abo-Zena, North Carolina '93. During a lunch of barbeque, I was introduced to my colleagues in a cafeteria in rural North Carolina. I was one of the only new faces, and they circled around me with their friendly questions.

"Are you Baptist?" they asked.

"No."

"Are you Episcopalian?" they wondered.

"No." I felt myself flushing.

"Are you Lutheran?"

"No."

"So what are you?"

Suddenly, I remembered myself as the only Muslim child in the class being asked what I got for Christmas. Then, I did not know how to begin to answer.

Now with this authority as Teacher, I realized I had the responsibility to explicitly welcome children of all religious backgrounds. I did not want any child to experience the isolation I had felt. I began to plan how I could expose the class to religious traditions without celebrating any. I wanted to teach children how to ask sensitively, and how to answer confidently. While they may not fully understand why ours was the only class not having a Halloween party, at least they began to question.

Eric Guckian, North Carolina '95. I straighten the knot in my tie, wipe my brow with my handkerchief and look down the benches where my students stand before me. Three weeks ago I became a fourth grade teacher. Every morning has started just like this one. We sing, our principal gives the morning announcements and we move up four flights of stairs with cages for railings until we reach classroom 404, my fourth grade classroom. Thirty-two students sit in their chairs packed like sardines. They look at me and they expect something. Thus far I have fallen short, far short of what they need and deserve.

I am trying. I stay up late creating interesting lesson plans that fall flat on their faces when I try to execute them. Today I tried reading from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The opening scene of the book depicts the Ku Klux Klan burning the leader's childhood home.

"Hey Mr. Gu-Can?" Corey asked. "How do I know you weren't in the KKK?"

"Now, Corey," I reply. "Do you really think I would be here if I felt that way?"

"Well, maybe you weren't, but maybe your father was, or your father's father was, and now you just feel guilty."

I have no response for Corey. I look at his hard stare, and then I look down at the tops of my shoes. Colgate and now Teach For America have offered me countless books to read, with words that espouse the values of critical thinking, celebrating diversity, and multiple intelligences. But only Corey, a nine-year-old boy with a razor sharp intellect, could have brought me to this moment.

Camika Royal, Baltimore '99. I chose to come to Baltimore because the site guide said its school system's students were 89% African American, like me (I am 100% African-American, but I think you know what I mean). I was eager to teach Black students. When I got my school placement at the Institute, I shortly thereafter found out that I would be teaching in a poor White neighborhood. I was angry; there were so few African-American corps members coming to Baltimore and so many Black children there who needed teachers who looked like them. I could not understand why I was placed somewhere I thought the children didn't need me. When I got to my school, I saw that the student population was about 60% Black and 40% White, but all my students were from low-income backgrounds, and regardless of their race, they brought with them all of the academic challenges that having been educated in under-resourced schools brings. I began to learn about my students individually and treat them accordingly, instead of continuing my assumptions on what I thought they would be like based on my limited life experiences. By the end of the year, because I saw my students as people who each needed something unique and tailored to them, I was able to truly teach them. And my children taught me more about life and race and possibility by the end of the year than I ever thought was possible.

John White, New Jersey '99. I taught in a school of over 3,000 students. Forty languages were spoken in the homes of my students and their families. Difference was the invigorating, volatile foundation of our community.

Packing up after my first day of teaching, I looked up as two ninth-grade girls approached me, arms linked. "Mister," they called in unison—and then just one: "You're White, right?"

It was the perfect pitch for any one of a dozen punch line home runs. So good that I had no idea what to say. "Yes. I am."

"White-Dominican or White-Italian?"

I don't remember how I answered, but my answer involved my story—where I was from, how that led me here, where my parents were from, why I wasn't there.

There were other ethnic reductions. African-Americans were either "Black-Dominican" or "Black-American." Hispanic students not from Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic were "Spanish." Anyone claiming ancestry in Saharan Africa or central Asia was "Muslim."

But a push beyond those labels compelled storytelling. I was a WASP who went to college in Virginia. Alice was African-American and had family in Virginia, as did Lashawn, but they guessed that wasn't the same Virginia as mine. And that necessitated more stories. Mustafa was Indian but he wasn't a Hindu. Luis was "Spanish" but he didn't speak Spanish. Storytelling was our tool for resolving the contradictions that emerged of our strange life together.

Strife came when individuals couldn't author their own stories. A theatre troupe told us about ancient Black Egyptians, when we—in great part Black, in great part Egyptian—had stories of our own that seemed not to corroborate that story. We watched from my classroom window as men destroyed the World Trade Center towers, less than two miles away. Fewer scarves were worn in the days following; anger and fear had muted the stories.

In the weeks following that day, a student died. She was a young woman. She was a Christian, and she was African-American. About fifty of us went to the wake together. Some of us had grown up in African-American churches, some in other churches. Many had never been in a church. A few

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had been told not to go to churches. The mother was heaving hard cries and the father would pat her on the back as my students walked by and said in many words and in few, the bits of the story they held, like offerings from a community of storytellers.

Tracy Epp, Rio Grande Valley '97. When I learned that I'd be teaching in the RGV, I figured I'd relate and adjust rather well. Growing up in a small town with limited resources, being the first in my family to graduate from college, and having observed the reality of the advantage my privileged peers had, I thought I would absolutely be able to relate to my students. Though I was White and all of my students were Mexican-American, I grew up underprivileged and my family history was similar to that of my students.

At the same time I expected my students and I to understand each other, I found myself frustrated with their ideas and opinions—especially around gender and sexuality. I thought that my students just didn't "get it" and it was a strong religious upbringing and isolation to the rest of the world that brought on these ideas. I found myself having conversations with my colleagues about my frustrations—almost always, these conversations were about me and who I was and less about who my students were.

At the point I realized that both of these things had to coexist, real learning took place, both on my part and on the part of the students. It led to real culture of respect, interest in others' ideas and most of all, critically analyzing why we do and think the things we do.

I began to reflect on my practice in the classroom in the context of both where I was coming from and where my students were coming from. This by no means meant lumping my kids into one category, but rather led to not only a desire, but a necessary step in the learning process, to truly know my students.

III. Conclusion: How Will Diversity Issues Play Out in Your Classroom?

In all likelihood, these reflections sparked in your own mind a whole range of new questions about what your teaching experience will be like. What dynamics of difference and sameness will play out in your classroom? How will you approach them? How will you recognize them?

As one more catalyst for these types of reflections—and as a bridge to the next chapter on uncovering your own hidden biases and privileges—you will read with this chapter an excerpt from Lisa Delpit's book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*.⁴⁹ This chapter, titled "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," focuses in particular on the dynamics of difference and sameness that play out between White and non-White teachers when communicating about how to best educate non-White children. She introduces the topic with several statements from minority teachers discussing their frustration with their White colleagues who do not listen to their ideas, causing them to stop verbalizing their opinions and thus "silencing" the conversation on the education of students of color. Think about whether you have ever been in such a situation—on either side of that divide. Also consider carefully Delpit's contention that White, middle-class children come to school already benefiting from a culture of power, and have different needs than their non-White peers. In the next several chapters, we will address this issue in both a personal and a more theoretical/academic way.

⁴⁹ Delpit, Lisa. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: The New Press, 1995, pp. 21-47. Chapter title: "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children."

As you read Delpit's chapter and as you consider the anecdotes and reflections you read above, think about your own identity—whatever your ethnicity, race, background, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.—and imagine your own classroom, school, and community. What dynamics of difference and sameness may play out there? Can you predict what your “dynamics of difference and sameness” reflection will look like once you are in the classroom?

Please take another break from the text at this point to read the aforementioned selection by Lisa Delpit entitled “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children,” which can be accessed by visiting the Pre-Institute Work page on the Institute Info Center within TFANet. 📖

The “Knowledge Base” of Self: Uncovering Hidden Biases and Unpacking Privilege

Chapter Five

- I. Paths to Effective Teaching: Exploring Bias and Privilege
- II. Exploring Your Own Bias
- III. “Unpacking” Privilege
- IV. How Exploring Your Biases and Privileges Makes You a Better Teacher
- V. Addressing Your Biases and Privileges in the Classroom
- VI. Conclusion: Getting Started Exploring Your Biases and Unpacking Your Privilege

In your quest to harness the instructional power of diversity-related dynamics in your classroom, one of the most important “knowledge bases” is self-knowledge. Not only must you be keenly aware of your own identities and background (and how they will create dynamics of difference and sameness in the classroom), but you also must be cognizant of your own beliefs and perspectives and how those may be influencing your classroom leadership.

The challenge here is that our beliefs and perspectives are not always obvious, even to ourselves. Indeed, it is the hidden or subconscious presumptions, biases, and prejudices that can sometimes undermine our overt declarations of high expectations for our students.

As we will discuss below, the process of “knowing thyself” serves as a key foundation for becoming an effective teacher in your classroom in at least two ways. First, this process helps a teacher develop empathy and understanding about his or her students’ backgrounds and perspective. Second, looking at your own biases and privileges helps you interact more effectively with people in the school community because you develop a better understanding of your perspectives, their perspectives, and how any differences between them might affect your interactions.

For these reasons, excellent teachers of all backgrounds reflect on their own perspectives, seeking out patterns of thought and hidden assumptions that might be hampering or supporting their role as the instructional leader of their classroom. They also think critically about their own identity characteristics, searching for ways in which those characteristics affect their day-to-day interactions with students and colleagues. Especially for those teachers who happen to share some identity characteristics with the “dominant” culture, taking time to consider what unearned privileges one enjoys because of those identities is an important and revealing process.

In this chapter, you will be asked to think carefully about your own background. Whether or not you share characteristics such as race, socioeconomic status, and background with your students, you can benefit from reflecting on what overt or hidden biases you bring to the classroom, and what you can do to overcome them.

Additional Readings

Along with this chapter, please read the following selection found on the Institute Info Center within TFANet, and visit the web page below:

- “Unpacking Straight Privilege” by Earlham College Students
- In addition, please spend some time completing Teaching Tolerance’s hidden bias tests online, located at: http://www.tolerance.org/hidden_bias/index.html

The “Knowledge Base” of Self

I. Paths to Effective Teaching: Exploring Bias and Privilege

The Distinction Between Bias and Privilege

Two general parameters shape these potentially personal conversations. First, we separately define and address issues of “bias” and issues of “privilege.”

By “bias,” we mean an individual’s internalized—but often unrealized—preferences for or assumptions about some group. A teacher’s tendency to call on boys more often than girls, or to punish African-American students differently, or to predominantly choose short stories that reflect her own cultural background are all examples of possible manifestations of bias in the classroom.

By “privilege” we mean the ways in which an individual enjoys unearned advantages because of some societal preference for some aspect of his or her identity. Examples include a White teacher’s (perhaps unrecognized) assurance that there will be short stories to choose from that reflect his or her identity characteristics, or a male teacher’s assumed appointment to a budgetary committee.

Both of these concepts—bias and privilege—require careful self-reflection. While in both cases that self-reflection leads us to revelations about how we can be more effective in the classroom, the ways that you can most effectively unearth bias and privilege are different. Thus, we address them separately.

Exploring Bias and Privilege as a Means to Academic Achievement, Not an End unto Itself

The second basic parameter for this conversation is that exploring one’s own beliefs, perspectives, and privilege is a means to effective teaching, not an end unto itself. We are embarking on self-analysis not out of any desire to make ourselves feel guilty, or proud, or blamed, or pleased, or angry; rather, we are working to discover internal influences that threaten to lower our expectations of our students.

Maintaining high expectations is the key reason that we ask you to build the “knowledge base” regarding your own biases about your students and communities and the privileges you have enjoyed because of some aspect of your identity.

I remember it was really hard to prevent making assumptions of why occasionally parents would be late or not show up to parent teacher conferences. It scared me to realize that I would be more generous and “understanding” of those parents from higher income communities. To combat this, I actually used an envisioning exercise where each of my parents were huge company CEOs who were extremely busy with multiple meetings, and thought of how I would react in that same situation in a more affluent environment and what assumptions I would make about those parents in a suburban community. That allowed me to maintain very high expectations of my parents, but at the same time understand that they had multiple things they were juggling—and it didn’t matter if the job was president of Xerox or cleaning the riverboat casinos or working for a local real estate company—but still had the best interests of their students in mind. And it worked--with the right amount of persistence—I had extremely high parent turnout for my conferences. And it didn’t matter if we had to reschedule or if I had to make a home visit or arrive at school early. It’s what any good teacher would do.

Maia Heyck-Merlin, S. Louisiana ‘99
Chief Operating Officer, Achievement First

[A] teacher’s culture, language, social interests, goals, cognitions, and values—especially if different from the students’—could conceivably create a barrier to understanding what is best for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Teachers can break through this barrier by reflecting on their self-knowledge and by learning to acknowledge and respect their students’ language, literacy, literature, and cultural ways of knowing.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ “Critical Issue: Addressing Literacy Needs in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Classrooms.” North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, p. 2.

In order to most effectively lead our students to dramatic academic achievement and thereby give them vastly expanded opportunities in life, we must acknowledge and overcome the often hidden lowered expectations that undermine our students' self-confidence and academic success. We must recognize that it is not only "society," but also *we* that hold those damaging lowered expectations. "When teachers become aware of their own cultural backgrounds and values, they have an opportunity to recognize and address any bias or preconceived notions they may have that would make it difficult for them to accept, understand, and effectively teach their students."⁵¹ So, we discuss bias and privilege because we must insist on, maintain, and prove valid the highest expectations we hold for our students—no matter what our students' race or class or gender or religion or orientation or disability.

Is This Discussion Meant for Everyone?

Yes. All of us—whether we identify as a person of color or as White, as affluent or as poor—can benefit from thinking about the hidden assumptions and prejudices we may have regarding our students, our schools, and our communities. Social psychologists will assure us that no matter what our color of skin and no matter what our background, we are not immune from the many influences in society that lead us to internalize subtle preferences, fears, and stereotypes about various groups of people with whom we are not familiar (and even those with whom we are). A corps member of color or a person of low socioeconomic status may bring a different perspective to this conversation than a White corps member or an affluent corps member. We do believe, however, that all new teachers need to consider these issues.

As discussed in the "Unpacking Privilege" section of this chapter, the process of considering one's unearned privilege is arguably more applicable to White, male, straight, and affluent persons than to African-American or Latino, female, homosexual, or poor persons, simply because the former groups are more likely to have experienced the type of societal preference that we are talking about. On the other hand, an argument might be made that to greater and lesser degrees, all of us, no matter what our primary or many identities, experience identity-based privileges in various contexts—that is, being Black, or Jewish, or female, or gay can and does confer elements of privilege in certain, specific contexts. For example, a Spanish-only speaker who must struggle to work within the dominant language and culture in an English-speaking community, might find that he or she enjoys the "privilege" of language dominance while in a different, Spanish-speaking community—where an English-only speaker might lose his or her privilege. Also, the mere fact that all of us have at least a bachelor's degree puts us in relatively exclusive company that undoubtedly affords us all certain privileges.⁵²

II. Exploring Your Own Bias

All of us would like to believe that we are free of biases—that we will enter our new communities and classrooms void of assumptions, misconceptions, and prejudices about those we interact with. And yet most of us, upon careful reflection, come to realize that we do in fact harbor hidden biases about various groups of people. Most pertinent to our discussion here, given our focus on the race- and class-correlated achievement gap, are the hidden biases each of us may have about African-American students, Latino students, and Native American students, and about poor students in low-income communities. Of course, also critically important to our self-reflections about prejudice and privilege are subtle and not-so-subtle ways that we, as teachers, may treat boys and girls differently in the classroom.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 3.

⁵² Only 24.3% of Americans aged 18 or over hold a Bachelor's Degree or higher, according to the 2002 Current Population Survey on Educational Attainment (found at www.census.gov).

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Consider the following experiment: teachers listened to students’ taped responses to questions about television programs. Teachers were shown a picture of either a White or Black student and told that that student had made the statement (even though the pictures were not actually of the speaker). The teachers were asked to rate the responses for personality, quality of the response, current academic abilities, and future academic potential. The results showed a highly significant relationship between the race of the student shown in the picture and teachers’ estimation of the students’ response and academic abilities,⁵³ laying bare the teachers’ deeply-rooted assumptions about the potential of African American students.

Initially, I was under the impression that community members, parents, and teachers were not concerned with the academic progress of the community’s children. I quickly learned that despite the conditions they live in, their hopes, dreams, and aspirations were far-reaching, and not limited to the poverty conditions that surrounded them. After inviting parents to a “report card dinner,” I quickly realized that we as a community were all in this together. I thought I was in this all by myself. Little did I know that I had a whole town behind me.

**Christopher Arnold, Greater New Orleans ‘04
Instructor, Purdue University**

As explained by Professor Ron Ferguson, who reported on this research, these results do not necessarily indicate that these teachers had a conscious or subconscious dislike of Black students. Rather, the explanation might be that these teachers have been conditioned by previous experience with Black students who underachieve in the classroom (as we know, Black students, statistically speaking, are disproportionately likely to have done). Of course, both possible motivations still result in racially biased behavior that could have very real impacts on a teacher’s instruction and management in the classroom. How would you perform on a similar test? Why do you think so? How can you know?

Going on the assumption that every student can be high-achieving if we show them how to be, I’ve had to consciously unpack and override my own bias about the background, resources, or personality traits that I’ve traditionally associated with high-achievers.

**Julia Guez, Houston ‘03
Graduate Student, Columbia University**

To help begin to answer those questions we strongly encourage you to put yourself through a similar test. Tolerance.org, a web project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, has made available on the Internet a series of bias-tests that were created by psychologists at Harvard and the University of Washington. These “implicit association tests” ask you to quickly respond to a series of rapidly changing images and ideas.

Log on to http://www.tolerance.org/hidden_bias/index.html to take some of these tests. (The results are kept entirely private.) After taking one or several of these five minute tests, read the attached tutorial to learn more about the tests themselves, about stereotypes and prejudice, and about the societal effects of bias. If you are interested in trying an additional or different bias test, please see the **Diversity, Community, & Achievement Toolkit** (p. 2: “Computer-Based Implicit Association Tests”); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet ✖

If you are like most participants in the online exercise, these tests will confirm the idea that even though we may believe we see and treat people as valued equals, hidden biases may still influence our perceptions and actions. The fact is that stereotypes and prejudice linger in most of us, and those biases can and do have impacts on our classrooms. Perhaps we make assumptions about students that “look” a certain way, or we make assumptions about why certain students do not do their homework. Maybe we have stopped making copies of the classroom assignments for Mary in detention because we “know” she

⁵³ Ferguson, R.F. “Teachers’ perceptions and expectations and the Black-White test score gap.” Printed in C. Jencks and M. Phillips (Eds.). *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998, p. 277.

is not going to do the work anyway—even though what Mary actually needs is to know that we do believe she can and will do the work.

After we discuss the related notion of privilege, we will review some concrete suggestions for diminishing the effects of those hidden biases in our classrooms.

III. “Unpacking” Privilege

Another angle from which we must build the “knowledge base” about ourselves is to consider the ways in which we benefit from societal preference for some aspect of our identity. “Unpacking privilege” is a metaphor used to describe the process of becoming aware of the ways in which our identity-based status in society confers on us invisible advantages in life, thereby shaping our experiences, viewpoints and actions. Such privileges may be conferred on us because we are White, male, affluent, educated, straight, able-bodied, Christian, or speakers of English. The process of “unpacking privilege” involves careful consideration of the societal realities that subtly—and not so subtly—create the “privilege” of additional opportunity, freedom, or comfort for us because of some aspect of our identity.

In your classroom, these privileges could manifest in any number of ways. Do we even contemplate the fact that letters from the school are written in English only? Do we plan a Mother’s Day project on the assumption that everyone has a parent who is a woman? Do we take for granted that religious symbols in a school celebrate Christianity? These questions often do not occur to those of us who are enjoying that so-obvious-as-to-be-invisible privilege.

As mentioned above, “unpacking” one’s privilege is not exclusively—but is probably predominantly—a responsibility of persons with identity characteristics most often associated with the dominant or mainstream majority in our society. It is precisely those individuals who are part of that “dominant” group that may be blind to the privilege that they themselves have experienced. “[D]ominant groups, whether by race or class, often are unaware of their identity because it is in sync with the internal and external images they hold of themselves and reality.”⁵⁴ (Nonetheless, we encourage all corps members to take part in this process because it is highly likely that all of us, in some way or another, enjoy some privileges beyond those enjoyed by our students, if for no other reason than by virtue of our level of academic achievement.)

McIntosh’s Original, Invisible Knapsack

The phrase “unpacking privilege” was popularized in large part by Peggy McIntosh at Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. An excerpt from Professor McIntosh’s work commonly called “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” has become a model for the kind of self-evaluation and awareness that is necessary for one to begin to recognize the many ways that social dynamics of power influence our lives. To further help define the phrase “unpacking privilege,” consider an excerpt of that influential 1988 essay:

Through work to bring materials from women’s studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men’s unwillingness to grant that they are over privileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say they will work to improve women’s status, in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they can’t or won’t support the idea of lessening men’s. Denials that amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages that men gain from

⁵⁴ “Critical Issue: Addressing Literacy Needs in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Classrooms.” North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, p. 2-3.

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women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully acknowledged, lessened, or ended.

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon, I realized that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there is most likely a phenomenon of White privilege that was similarly denied and protected. As a White person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, White privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think Whites are carefully taught not to recognize White privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have White privilege. I have come to see White privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks . . .

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
6. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on White privilege.
9. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
10. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
12. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
16. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
18. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.
19. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.

21. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, out numbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
23. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
24. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
25. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
26. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in flesh color and have them more or less match my skin.

I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me White privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own. . .⁵⁵

Thus, as McIntosh's essay makes clear, "unpacking privilege" refers to our attempts to pull back the veil of complex dynamics of difference and sameness that impact our lives—especially those dynamics that make us more appreciated, safe, influential, or comfortable in a given situation than we might be if we presented some alternative identity. Several variations of McIntosh's original piece have been written to help people unpack their privilege related to their gender, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. We ask that along with this chapter, you read the "Unpacking Straight Privilege" piece written by students at Earlham College about heterosexual privilege in society.

Teaching forced me to a new level of questioning and re-evaluating my racial identity. As a white woman, one of the privileges that I had experienced is that I had not often found myself in situations where I was the minority. In my classroom, I was the only white person in a classroom filled with students of color. I had a hard time coming to grips with the fact that even though I was the minority in numbers, I was still in power. My "power" did not come from being a part of a majority; it came from my white privilege.

Stephanie Crement, Bay Area '99
Special Education English/Language Arts Teacher
Boston Public Schools

Some people have described the process of unpacking privilege to be like "a fish discovering water." Coming to grips with the ways in which you may have enjoyed unearned benefits because of your identity can be a surprising, disturbing and even painful process. It is a critically important process for teachers to go through, as difficult as it may be.

As some of you have no doubt already experienced, recognizing the unspoken privileges that one's White-ness, or male-ness, or straight-ness, or affluence offer can obviously be an unsettling process. But keep in mind that the difficulty of this process is not, in and of itself, its purpose. The point of this process is not to make anyone feel guilty or ashamed, but is instead to identify those power dynamics that shape our beliefs and perspectives so that we can be more aware of them in the context of our

classroom. Only by recognizing your own biases, and the assumptions you may have developed because of privilege, can you effectively fight the temptation to act on lowered expectations of our students' achievement.

⁵⁵ McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies." A working paper at Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1988.

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IV. How Exploring Your Biases and Privileges Makes You a Better Teacher

Thus, in the teacher-training context, reflecting on your own prejudices and privileges is not an end unto itself, but rather is a means to becoming a better teacher. But what is the connection between this potentially personal and painful process and teaching well?

The answer to that question begins with a recognition of the close relationship between bias and privilege. In a manner of speaking, these two concepts are corollaries of one another. If one carries a bias, he or she has some unfounded assumptions that shape expectations of the targeted group’s behavior or abilities. On the other hand, if one enjoys a “privilege” (in the sense we are using here), one likely has some unfounded assumptions about one’s own contribution to his or her success in the world. That is, “privilege” is closely related to “bias” in that “privilege” involves unquestioned assumptions about *one’s self*. In both cases, the process of “uncovering” or “unpacking” that bias or privilege is a process of replacing those assumptions with a more nuanced and real vision of one’s interactions with others. In the context of teaching, this quest for a more nuanced and realistic view of the world is particularly important and has direct implications for a teacher’s interactions with and leadership of students.

First, this heightened awareness and vision is key to understanding who your students are and how their backgrounds and cultures and experiences shape their view of and approach to your classroom. That is, as a teacher who is trying to assess students’ needs and motivations, you must have an unfiltered view of the students’ abilities and past performance. Exploring your biases and privileges is a way to check yourself for those “filters” that would otherwise inhibit your ability to truly read and help your students. Have you made assumptions about the process and pace of your students’ learning of some concept based on your own experience with that concept, even though you were a native English speaker and your student is not? Or, maybe you find yourself making assumptions about the reasons behind your students’ acting out—assumptions that are entirely based on your experience as a student of that age and that ignore critical differences in the challenges that you faced and those facing your students. Perhaps you are not thinking about the impact that others’ high expectations for you had on your own performance and behavior?

The better knowledge of our students’ perspectives and challenges (that arises from exploring one’s bias and privilege) leads to insights that inform instructional and

Before I went into the classroom, I automatically thought that I would have a pretty simple time as a teacher in the classroom. After all, not only was I of the same background as the students I taught, but I had also grown up with similar socio-economic and educational inequities. This fact alone built my confidence; I would be able to assimilate into the school and community culture with pure ease. After my first week of school, I was perplexed by how my assumption was completely inaccurate. I had students and colleagues questioning why I was teaching in their neighborhood. I tried to explain my similar circumstance to what they were experiencing; yet, they were hesitant to believe me. They mentioned how the language I spoke was proper, my style of dress was different, and how each and every day I drove home in my car to another neighborhood that I called home. This was very disappointing to me, but it made me realize how important it was for me to recognize the privilege I was bringing to the classroom. Although I was a minority, I had gone to college and had amassed certain experiences that were not common to my students or their families. My perspective had completely changed. I was the same as my students in terms of skin color but our experiences were different based on the academic freedom I had the opportunity to explore. I had to approach the situation differently. I had to approach my school community more humbly, acknowledging my privilege while expressing (through my actions) my purpose for teaching—giving my students the same opportunities I was lucky enough to receive so that they too have choices and a voice for their own life experiences.

Susan Asiyambi, New Jersey '01
Senior Vice President – Teacher Preparation, Support, and Development
Teach For America

managerial decisions in the classroom. As we are able to truly trust our own assessments of students' needs and challenges, we are better able to address them.

Second, looking at your own biases and privileges helps you interact more effectively with people in the school community because you develop a better understanding of your perspectives, their perspectives, and how any differences between them might affect your interactions. A teacher's exploration of his or her bias and privilege may offer insights into how that teacher is perceived by—and how that teacher perceives—others. What do my colleagues see as the privileges that I have enjoyed? How can I know? What of my deep-seated biases have my students picked up on and how does that affect our relationships? What are my biases and default assumptions about the administrators in my school, and how have those assumptions colored my interactions with them? These types of questions—all fruits of the “unpacking” process discussed above—are keys to maintaining the respect and humility necessary to have a meaningful impact on your classroom, school, and community.

In our experience, corps members who look within themselves to consider the ways in which their various identities have advantaged and disadvantaged them are more effective as classroom and community leaders, and are more often successful in their quest to close the achievement gap for their students. In a nutshell, they are better able to maintain the high expectations that they have set for their students.

V. Addressing Your Biases and Privileges in the Classroom

What is a teacher to do upon realizing that he harbors some potentially damaging prejudices about his students? Or upon realizing that her previous assumptions about what should be “easy” for her students is shaped, in part, by privileges afforded her by her own identity?

There is no easy or blanket answer to this question—as every situation most certainly has unique characteristics that call for unique solutions. We have, however, mapped out a few strategies in other texts that offer guidance here. For example:

I think I had always associated rural poverty with white folks and urban poverty with people of color. I also believed that urban settings were more dangerous and rural settings were more impoverished. As a white man from a lower SES town in the northeast, in my experience this was an accurate assumption. Working in Garyville, Louisiana, as part of the GNO corps, I realized just how subjective that experience was, and my notions about what poverty looks like were completely challenged.

**Bill Murphy, Greater New Orleans '00
Principal, Baltimore City Public Schools**

- **Collect Data.** In a case where you suspect you are preferencing one group of students over another in your interactions in class, you should (a) create a system that monitors your interactions (perhaps a clipboard with students' names on it and put a check by the student's name as he or she shares a response or gets to participate in a demonstration), and (b) create a system that ensures variety in your calling on students (such as the tried-and-true popsicle sticks approach). For more information, see the section on “Engaging, Involving, and Valuing All Students” on page 69 of the *Classroom Management & Culture* book.
- **Bring In Fresh Eyes.** Ask your Program Director or co-worker to observe your classroom and bring a fresh perspective, looking for any manifestations of the bias that you are concerned about exhibiting. Sometimes an observer will see things that you do not. Or, your observer might be able to reassure you that your suspected bias is not actually manifesting in the classroom.

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- **Grab Opportunities to Challenge Your Assumptions.** There is no antidote for prejudices like counter-evidence from your own students. If, for example, you are worried that you do not have as much faith in your girls as your boys during math class, pay particular attention to some girls’ math products and, in all likelihood, you will find your assumptions shaken by the very real evidence before you.
- **Watch Yourself.** Using video tape to examine your own practices is an excellent way to watch for bias- and privilege-driven behaviors. Does the privilege you have enjoyed as a White person, or as a Christian, or as a college graduate impact your classroom teaching and interactions with students? By watch your own teaching with those questions in mind, you may discover ways that you can mitigate the impact of bias and privilege.

While these various strategies are all helpful in particular contexts, the bottom line is that there is no solution for your hidden prejudices like openly acknowledging them. Once you identify your propensity to think or feel a certain way about a certain group of students, your awareness of that pattern will be heightened and you will automatically begin to adjust your behavior in response.


VI. Conclusion: Getting Started Exploring Your Biases and Unpacking Your Privilege

In this chapter, you have been asked to look within. “Knowledge of self” is one of the first and arguably most important diversity-related knowledge bases that you need to develop in order to maximize the learning in your classroom.

While many of you have already begun this process (and you will be encouraged to explore your hidden biases and privileges this summer), we also encourage you to think now—as you read this text—about what basic assumptions, perspectives, biases, prejudices, and privileges you will be bringing to your summer and regional classrooms. When you imagine the students you will be teaching, what and whom do you see? What are your honest, base assumptions about those students and how can you mitigate the effects of those assumptions? Which of your many personal experiences in life will shape—for better and for worse—your perspective of your students, of your classroom, of your school, and of the hard work that will be required of you and your students to succeed?

There were several times that my students told me that I couldn’t understand because I was white. Sometimes they were right – there were things I couldn’t understand initially because of my background- but when I asked them to explain the situation to me, the conversations we had were really powerful for all of us. The fact that I was willing to learn from them made a huge difference in the relationship I had with my students.

**Jessica Murphy, Greater New Orleans ‘99
Behavior Specialist, Indianapolis Public Schools**

At this point, please read “Unpacking Straight Privilege” by Earlham College Students, which can be accessed by visiting the Pre-Institute Work page on the Institute Info Center within TFANet. 

How Racial Identity Affects Performance

Chapter Six

- I. How We Identify Ourselves: Why Race Matters
- II. Stages of Racial Development
- III. Implications for Teachers
- IV. Conclusion: Building Supportive and Responsive Classrooms

Mrs. Johnston, a white woman, comes to pick up her black daughter, Lucy, from kindergarten. Josie, Lucy's classmate, says to her teacher, "Ms. Potts, they don't match." Ms. Potts says, "Shhhh! That's not polite to say."

Mr. Dillon discusses slavery with his third graders as part of their American history lessons. One of his African-American students, Patricia, asks a question: "Did the slaves fight back?" Mr. Dillon says, "How could they? The white people had weapons."

Ms. Katz is used to Alex, a seventh grader, behaving well in her class. One day, Alex starts wearing a hat and a big, puffy coat to class, angrily taking them off only after Ms. Katz tells him to do so twice. He starts challenging the class assignments, asking, "Why do we have to do this?" Ms. Katz calls Alex's mother and tells her that Alex is being disruptive.

Eduardo, a ninth grader, comes into Ms. Singh's class furious. "Ms. Moore's a racist," he fumes. "She gave me a D on this paper." Ms. Singh responds, "You shouldn't throw words around like that. Ms. Moore wouldn't be teaching here if she were a racist."

Mr. Leonard gets Sandra, his top science student, a chance to attend a special summer camp for high school juniors in the state capital. When he shows her the brochure, Sandra says she doesn't want to go. Mr. Leonard is annoyed because he's gone to a lot of trouble to help Sandra, and she appears to be ungrateful.

In the last chapter, we explored the "knowledge base" of ourselves – how we may harbor biases and enjoy privileges that will influence our approach to teaching. In this chapter, we are expanding that discussion to the *development* of identity – both in teachers and students – to see how who we are and how we think about our place in the world changes over time.

The ways in which your students *think* and *feel* about the issue of race and their own racial group membership – hereafter called their "racial identity" – may significantly affect their achievement. It may influence whether individual students tune you in or out, whether they believe they can achieve, whether they believe that school will support or degrade them. As you may have already surmised from the vignettes above, how a teacher treats the issue of race in the classroom can greatly impact a student's development.

Additional Readings

Along with this chapter, please read the Noguera excerpt found on the Institute Info Center within TFANet, and the Tatum chapters found in the Related Reading section:

- "How Racial Identity Affects School Performance" by Pedro Noguera from the *Harvard Educational Letter*
- "The Early Years" and "Critical Issues in Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American Identity Development" from *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum

How Racial Identity Affects Performance

A discussion of students' racial identity development is complicated by the fact that a teacher's approach to decision-making in the classroom and in the community will be shaped by his or her *own* racial identity development. Ms. Potts might have been taught never to talk about race and feels everyone should be "color-blind" and "just get along." Mr. Leonard may have never thought that he thinks about the world in ways different than Sandra, and that Sandra may be apprehensive about going to a place where there may not be other people who look like her - or where people might subtly question how she got to be there. Keep these teachers in mind as you read through the chapter, and think about the ways in which they might begin to shift their perspectives in order to serve their students effectively.

Racial identity development, both for us and for our students, is all about shifting perspective. Psychologists have developed various theories describing stages of racial identity development that relate to a person's age and his or her life experiences. By understanding these stages - and the potential feelings and attitudes often associated with them - we as teachers can be better equipped to help students navigate their identities and expand their views of their own potential.

I didn't realize when I entered my classroom how much I did have in common with my students. On the surface, it isn't obvious that a white woman from the Midwest, a graduate of a liberal arts college and decidedly upper-middle class, would have much common experience with a group of teenagers in rural North Carolina—and it was obvious on the first day my students didn't think I had much in common with them either! Over the next few days, though, I began to remember experiences I had lived through that allowed me to connect with my students on a different level, things that they couldn't see about me at first glance. When they found out that I was the child of a teenage mother, that I was raised for the first seven years of my life in near-poverty, that I too was from a rural area, relationships began to build and strengthen. Even if I had not shared those facts, or had not realized myself how similar we really were, I know that we would have found common experiences somewhere. Though the obvious differences are the easiest thing to see, the human experiences are where we truly are able to connect with our students on a higher level.

Crystal Brakke, North Carolina '99
Vice President - Institutes
Teach For America

As we proceed, we will survey some scholars' theories on these stages, their implications, and the ways in which you can help students develop a positive self-image, a sense of malleable intelligence, and an internal locus of control. We will follow racial identity development theory through adulthood, so that you can consider how your understanding of your own racial identity will affect the ways in which you present and address issues of cultural pertinence in the classroom.

I. How We Identify Ourselves: Why Race Matters

Do you think of yourself as smart? Do you attribute your success to hard work? How we think about ourselves makes a huge difference in how we perform in the classroom. During childhood, we are bombarded by messages that will ultimately help to form our self-concept during adolescence. As race relations expert and Spelman College President Beverly Daniel Tatum points out in her book, *Why Are The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, adolescence is the stage when we finally have the cognitive ability to reflect on who we are and what we might become. As we sort out these questions, we come to decide whom we will date, what professions we'll pursue, where we will live, and what we believe.⁵⁶ In order to formulate our responses, we focus on aspects of our identity that are salient to us, and we examine these aspects in others in an attempt to form our sense of self.

⁵⁶ Tatum, Beverly Daniel. "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" *And Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997, p. 20.

Part of students' self-understanding and self-esteem in the classroom involves what psychologists call

I have found that my African-American students are constantly striving to define blackness. I know this all too well for I've been through the very same struggle myself.

*In their attempts to uncover a definition of blackness, they see me—a light-skinned African American woman who to them appears racially ambiguous. I expected their questions about my ethnicity; after all I have been met with them throughout my life. They want to know if I am Black, Hispanic, or mixed so they will be able to "figure me out." I use such questions to facilitate discussion about race. I share my experiences and my family's experiences. I am an open book and they are grateful for it. My African American students want to be black, to act black, to sound black. I feel it is my job to show the beauty and the diversity of the African American experience. It is not any one thing. It does not make you more or less black to come from the inner city or speak using slang. These are only facets of the Black experience—they do not encompass the whole. To suggest otherwise is to do a disservice to all who have come before us. We read texts that examine race and race-mixing such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color of Water*. We talk about race. We do not run away from it. Part of being effective is teaching students to value themselves and one another. Our discussion and reading facilitate this.*

**Dara Crocker, New Jersey '02
Vice Principal
Newark Public Schools**

our "racial identity." Racial identity is not your race, but rather how you *think* about your race. Columbia University Professor Robert T. Carter puts it this way: "The term 'racial identity' refers to one's psychological response to one's own race; it reflects the extent to which one identifies with a particular racial group and how that identification influences perceptions, emotions, and behaviors toward people from other groups."⁵⁷

Theories of racial identity development are pertinent to teachers because depending on how you think about the role of race in who you are and how others view you, you can either develop very positive or negative perspectives on your ability to be successful. Clearly, those perspectives impact students' relationships with their teacher and their school work. In the late 1960s, Iowa classroom teacher Jane Elliott developed a now famous experiment with her students, telling the blue-eyed children that they were less capable than their brown-eyed peers. Very soon afterwards, students began to internalize the meanings associated with the labels of superiority or inferiority to which they had been assigned, dramatically affecting their academic performance.⁵⁸ Within a half-hour, blue-eyed Carol transformed from a "brilliant, self-confident carefree, excited little girl to a frightened, timid, uncertain little almost-person," Elliott later reported. The labels had fundamentally shaped the children's behavior.

We come to think of ourselves through lenses that have proven meaningful to our lives. During one activity commonly used in diversity seminars, participants are asked to select the label that they would use to identify themselves, if they could only pick one. What might you say? Often participants choose "college graduate," "daughter," "gay," "Catholic," "Asian-American," or "black." Only rarely does anyone say "white." Tatum has seen similar dynamics play out in the classes she leads.⁵⁹ She reports:

Researchers have found that adolescents of color are more likely to be engaged in an exploration of their racial or ethnic identity than are White counterparts. Why do Black youths, in particular, think about themselves in terms of race? Our self-perceptions are shaped by the messages that we receive from those around us, and when young Black men and women enter adolescence, the racial content of those messages intensifies. A case in point: if you were to ask my ten-year-old son, David, to describe himself, he would

⁵⁷ Carter, Robert. "Reimagining Race in Education: A New Paradigm from Psychology." *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 102, No. 5, October 2000, p. 874.

⁵⁸ Peters, William. *A Class Divided: Then and Now*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

⁵⁹ Tatum, Beverly Daniel. "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" *And Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997, pp. 20-21.

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tell you many things: that he is smart, that he likes to play computer games, that he has an older brother. Near the top of his list, he would likely mention that he is tall for his age. He would probably not mention that he is Black, though he certainly knows that he is. Why would he mention his height and not his racial group membership? When David meets new adults, one of the first questions they ask is “How old are you?” When David states his age, the inevitable reply is “Gee, you’re tall for your age!” It happens so frequently that I once overheard David say to someone, “Don’t say it. I know. I’m tall for my age.” Height is salient for David because it is salient for others.

When David meets new adults, they don’t say, “Gee, you’re Black for your age!” If you are saying to yourself, of course they don’t, think again. Imagine David at fifteen, six-foot-two, wearing the adolescent attire of the day, passing adults he doesn’t know on the sidewalk. Do the women hold their purses a little tighter, maybe even cross the street to avoid him? Does he hear the sound of the automatic door locks on cars as he passes by? Is he being followed around by the security guards at the local mall? As he stops in town with his new bicycle, does a police officer hassle him, asking where he got it, implying that it might be stolen? Do strangers assume he plays basketball? Each of these experiences convey a racial message. At ten, race is not yet salient for David, because it is not yet salient for society. But it will be.⁶⁰

Tatum explains why, for some white individuals, race may not be a significant piece of identity that influences their larger self-concept. “In the areas where a person is a member of a dominant or advantaged social group, the category is usually not mentioned,” she points out. “That element of their identity is so taken for granted by them that it goes without comment. It is taken for granted by them because it is taken for granted by the dominant culture.”⁶¹ In the last chapter, during the discussion of privilege, you began to consider what aspects of your identity – race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, class, language – you might take for granted. In *whatever* way you represent a dominant or advantaged social group, you may not be able to see the very real and important dimensions that shape the lives of people different from you.

Ignoring students’ backgrounds is like ignoring a huge piece of what makes them who they are. My students knew I was white, and I knew they were not, and we all knew we had a lot to learn from each other. Once we got that out of the way and acknowledged our differences, then we were able to have some really amazing discussions.

Jessica Murphy, Greater New Orleans ‘99 Behavior Specialist, Indianapolis Public Schools

This means that teachers for whom race was never a salient piece of their identity development may fail to recognize the significance of race in their students’ lives. Professor Carter notes that this is most likely the case for white teachers: “Whites generally do not see themselves as members of a racial group. To the extent that their own racial group membership is deemphasized, so too is their awareness regarding the impact of racism on their own psychological development. Consequently, they do not understand or appreciate the significance of race or racism in the lives of People of Color.”⁶² When this occurs in the classroom, teachers may avoid conversations or topics related to race because they are uncomfortable talking about it or do not see its importance.

⁶⁰ Ibid. pp. 53-54.

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 21.

⁶² Carter, Robert. “Reimagining Race in Education: A New Paradigm from Psychology.” *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 102, No. 5, October 2000, p. 874.

But, as we'll see later in the chapter, many students need just the opposite; they need their teachers to *affirm* their racial identity while *acknowledging* and helping them *navigate* the challenges that students of color face. Fulfilling these needs would be difficult, if not impossible, for a teacher who did not recognize the importance of racial identity – or the nuances of its development in children and adolescents. On top of this, you will need to think about how students may perceive your race and interpret your responses to conversations about race.

Tatum and Carter's findings help us as educators of all different backgrounds in two important ways: (1) we learn that race matters more in self-identity development for some people than it does for others, (2) we learn that teachers who are less aware of their own racial identity may have more difficulty understanding *why* it matters to some of the students they teach. In this next section, we will discuss how that difficulty might decrease over time – and what that means for a teacher's instruction and interaction with students.

II. Stages of Racial Development

Some teachers claim to be figuratively “color-blind” in the classroom. In this way of thinking, color is perceived to have no bearing on instruction, how teachers relate to students, and how people in schools communicate with one another. This may be because, as noted earlier, these individuals have never thought about the significance of race in their own lives; others adopt this viewpoint because they think it is impolite or inappropriate to talk about race.

According to most psychologists, these perspectives are part of a developmental process or continuum that we move along as we expand our understanding of racial identity. In fact, some scholars have proposed a patterned cycle of racial identity awareness – one for white people, who typically begin to understand their “whiteness” after adolescent development, and another for people of color, who often begin that process much earlier in life. Below, we will critically explore one set of these theories that suggests some possible stages that individuals may go through as they engage their racial identity over time.

Of course, as with most theories of psychological development, any proposed system of racial identity development does not precisely describe the development of every person in every case. And, perhaps more importantly, delineating this process into “stages” is not intended to impose a value judgment on our, or our students', many different perspectives and experiences. Our individual experiences may lead to different ways and patterns of thinking about our racial identity, and what is mapped out below is just one (or actually several) racial identity theorists' ways of thinking about the process individuals go through as they consider their own racial identity.

Moreover, Carter reminds us that members of the same race do not have the same racial identity. “Simply that someone is Black, White, or Latino does not tell us about the nature of his or her psychological involvement in his or her cultural group,” he writes. “And indeed, what is more important for each person within the context of the school environment is his or her psychological orientation to his or her race; that is, that person's own racial identity of other educators and students.”⁶³

In this respect, these stages are intended to be considered critically. You should consider whether you find them to be useful tools for your thinking about broad psychological processes; they should not be viewed as cut-and-dry blueprints for how all people have understood their racial identities since the dawn

⁶³ Ibid. p. 875.

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of time. With that context in mind, we are asking you to look at these stages with the particular purpose of thinking about how your and your students' racial identity will affect your interactions and decisions in the classroom and the community. Do these stages inform your thinking about that question? Do they seem recognizable to you? Where might you place yourself along one of these spectra? Where do you think your students are? How could you know? How does your students' racial identity development impact your instructional and managerial decision-making?

The origin of these ideas comes from psychologist William Cross, who developed a theory of African-American racial identity development in the 1970s. Other scholars have since expanded upon Cross's work, and although they use slightly different terms, psychologists believe that members of other American racial minorities often experience a similar process of identity awareness. This does not discount the fact that, as Professor Prichy Smith points out in *Common Sense About Uncommon Knowledge*, "important differences in attitudes, values, and behaviors distinguish ethnic groups; these differences affect the socialization of children within their own group and the attitudes and responses to other groups."⁶⁴ And, as mentioned above, considerable variation of perspective and experience does, of course, occur for individuals within any one of these groups. The general premise of this research is simply that members of different minority groups may experience similar underlying feelings *about* their identity and their relationship to the majority.

The chart that follows is a synthesis of several interpretations of Cross's original model. Review it critically. Does this approach to thinking about racial identity resonate with you? Why or why not? If you are a person of color, which aspects of this model align with your own experience? Which do not? And, as you examine this proposed framework, think about two things:

- (1) If you were a student at one of the first two stages, what might you need from your teacher?
- (2) If you were a teacher at each of the stages, what would that suggest about how you would respond to issues of race in the classroom?

Stages of Minority Racial Identity Development

Stage	What It Looks Like
Pre-encounter	In this phase, the individual idealizes the dominant identity or does not recognize the relevance of race. An African-American child might express a desire to be white. A child from a Spanish-speaking family might not want to learn Spanish.
Encounter	The individual encounters racism and is made to feel inferior, realizing that race alone can lead to negative treatment. The individual may develop a mistrust, or even hatred, toward the dominant group as a result.
Immersion-emersion	Exposed to new thinking about his or her race, the individual becomes engaged in self-research, ignoring the dominant group and beginning to develop a positive self-image. The individual might pursue ethnic studies in college, unlearning negative stereotypes about his or her racial group and discovering, as Tatum puts it, "there is more to Africa than Tarzan movies." ⁶⁵
Internalization	The individual is able to represent him or herself with a sense of confidence, security and pride in multiracial settings.
Internalization-commitment	The individual makes a commitment to promote his or her community within the larger society.

⁶⁴ Smith, G. Prichy. *Common Sense About Uncommon Knowledge*. American Association of College Teacher Educators, January 1998, p. 28.

⁶⁵ Tatum, Beverly Daniel. "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" *And Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997, pp. 76.

A similar (but different) framework is proposed for White people who (as members of a majority system) may not confront their race in the same way as members of minority groups. White people, some suggest, may have a different process of racial identity understanding.⁶⁶ Do you agree? Whether you identify as White or as a person of color, consider critically the following proposed stages of identity development. Do these stages ring familiar? How would you change them to more closely match your own experience with White persons' racial identity development? Also, please continue to consider the same two questions from above:

- (1) If you were a student at one of the first two stages, what might you need from your teacher?
- (2) If you were a teacher at each of the stages, what would that suggest about how you would respond to issues of race in the classroom?

White Racial Identity Development

Stages	What It Looks Like
Contact	The individual sees nothing wrong with the status quo. Often claiming "color-blindness," he or she is oblivious to racism and participates in it.
Disintegration	The individual, sometimes as a result of moving to a new place or beginning a friendship or romantic relationship with a member of another race, begins to see a system of racism at work, resulting in feelings of shame or confusion. He or she might start pointing out acts of prejudice or discrimination to others, or may try to ignore racism.
Reintegration	If the individual has attempted to point out acts of prejudice, he or she may find him or herself isolated from friends and may retreat into old patterns of accepting the status quo. If the individual has tried to ignore racism but cannot, he or she might blame people of color for their plight in society, absolving white people (and thus him or herself) of responsibility for ending racism. They are engaged what Professor Lawrence Bobo calls "laissez-faire racism," where they are conscious that oppression exists but do nothing about it.
Pseudo-independence	Often as a result of cross-racial interactions, the individual ultimately cannot ignore the system of privilege afforded to white people – and becomes paralyzed by his or her guilt. He or she may try to escape "whiteness" by befriending members of minority groups, pointing out the ways in which he or she is also subject to discrimination, and securing assurances that he or she is not racist.
Immersion-Emersion	The individual seeks new information about what it means to be white, searching for alternative, positive models as opposed to "victimizer."
Autonomy	The individual now views being white as a positive opportunity to dismantle oppression and makes a commitment to do so.

While we must again emphasize that these stages are not necessarily linear but rather fluid, and that they do not necessarily apply equally well to everyone, one of the benefits of these identity development theories is that they help place some of the attitudes we have either felt or witnessed into a larger framework. These theories lay bare and offer explanations for some of the reluctance, fear, anger or shame that different people feel when thinking or talking about race – an important hurdle to clear if we're going to be able to speak openly and supportively to students about their own self-image.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 93.

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Examining these processes is also useful because it allows us to see the ways in which people, both of different races and within the same race, can differ in their understanding of racial identity. Here are some important ideas to think about with respect to the charts we've just examined:

- Depending on a student's race, age and particular circumstances, racial identity can play a big part in forming his or her attitudes and behaviors. In this way, racial identity affects learning and motivation for learning. For instance, a student in the "Encounter" phase of minority racial identity development might internalize the stereotypes about her racial group and begin to question her ability to perform well on academic tasks that say they measure her natural ability.
- All of us go through stages of racial identity development. The transition from one state to another is an unpredictable time spurred by interactions and events that create shifts in our thinking. As a result, teachers may find themselves working with students who are, without warning, coping with particular and important aspects of their identity development.
- Teachers are going through stages of racial identity development themselves, which can affect the responses that they may give a student who raises issues of race in the classroom. According to scholar Robert Carter, "Whites [in the Reintegration and Pseudo-independence stages] do not see how they are using their own racial background and experiences as the standard for other racial groups...People of Color [in the Immersion-Emerson stage] are overzealous due to the fact that they are still in the process of evolving a positive internal racial identity, so they also distort information and tend to be less able to be balanced in their understanding of complex racial relationships."⁶⁷ We must all be conscious of the ways in which our own perspectives influence the ideas we advance and approaches we use in our classrooms.
- Because of the different stages and patterns of racial identity development, students may be at a different stage – or a completely different system – than their teachers, meaning that teachers should avoid applying their own feelings onto a child's experience.
- Given the developmental nature of racial identity, all teachers can play an important role in shaping a student's sense of identity and pride.

I explained color difference as follows to my five and six-year-old first graders: I would hold up two pieces of construction paper, one black and one white. Then I would hold my forearm next to a first grade student. Our conversation sounded like this:

"Faith, what color is the paper on the right?"

"Black"

"And what color is the paper on the left?"

"White"

"What color is your arm?"

"Dark brown"

"And what color is my arm?"

"Light brown"

"What color is your blood?"

"Red"

"And what color is mine?"

"I think it's red?"

"So what does that make you think?"

This type of direct observation allowed our "family" to start talking about the real issues of the color line - in first grade! This dialogue allowed us to analyze all of our differences and similarities including race.

**Justin May, Greater New Orleans '00
Second Grade Teacher, Addison Northeast
Supervisory Union**

In this next section, we will zoom in on the racial identity development of children and adolescents of color, and the ways in which teachers can help or hinder this process.

⁶⁷ Carter, Robert. "Reimagining Race in Education: A New Paradigm from Psychology." *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 102, No. 5, October 2000, p. 887.

Young children and pre-encounter experiences. Remember Ms. Potts, from the beginning of our chapter? She thought it was a better idea to silence the dialogue about race than to attempt to explain the diversity of families. Race can be a confusing concept for young children. They observe physical differences between one another at a very early age, but they do not yet have the social or historical vocabulary or abstract thinking capabilities to understand why they hear terms like “black,” when they are looking at someone more tan-colored. They will be listening intently to stories that describe the physical appearance of characters. Who is described as beautiful? How children hear adults talk about identity (or not talk about it) ends up shaping their future perceptions and attitudes.

As students learn about slavery or oppression – sadly, the only place that many children see people who look like them represented in the curriculum – it is important for teachers to ensure that students do not see members of their race cast as weak and docile masses, but rather individuals who often found ways to resist persecution. Mr. Dillon, from our fourth grade example, didn’t realize that Patricia might have asked her question about whether slaves “fought back” with the hopes of exploring and dignifying slaves’ struggle for independence (as opposed to as a criticism). In a different example, from whose perspective is the story of Thanksgiving – or the era of colonization – usually told?

Adolescence. There is no stage more critical to identity formation than adolescence. Starting with the pioneering psychologist Erik Erikson, researchers have explored this phase of human development as the time in which children begin figuring out who they are and the people after whom they would like to model themselves.⁶⁸ When thinking about students of color, then, it is important to dissect the messages that they are receiving about who they can and should become.

First, what are these messages, and where do they come from? Tatum points out that the media soaks children with limited and often negative role models to emulate:

In adolescence, as race becomes personally salient for Black youth, finding the answer to questions such as, “What does it mean to be a young Black person? How should I act? What should I do?” is particularly important. And although Black fathers, mothers, aunts and uncles may hold the answers by offering themselves as role models, they hold little appeal for most adolescents. The last thing many fourteen-year-olds want to do is grow up to be like their parents. It is the peer group, the kids in the cafeteria, who holds the answers to these questions. They know how to be Black. They have absorbed the stereotypical images of Black youth in the popular culture and are reflecting those images in their self-representation.⁶⁹

She contends that, if you were just to watch television, you might think that African-American children only grow up to be teenage welfare mothers, drug addicts, criminals, athletes and rap artists. Students also look around their school and begin to notice certain “environmental cues” that imply differences between races. In racially integrated schools, students may see the racial lines upon which schools with “ability-grouped” classrooms are drawn. They may see that students who look like them are severely under-represented in honors classes and over-represented in special education. They may see that they are not taken seriously when they believe a prejudicial incident has occurred.⁷⁰

How do students interpret these images and messages? You will get a personal account of what this might look like as you read Pedro Noguera’s piece, “How Racial Identity Affects School Performance”

⁶⁸ Erikson, Erik. *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton, 1993.

⁶⁹ Tatum, Beverly Daniel. “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*” *And Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997, pp. 760.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 56-57.

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from the *Harvard Education Letter*. In it, he describes how his teenage son, Joaquin, grappled with what it meant to become an African-American man. Noguera shows how Joaquin's journey to discover himself represents the struggles of many children of color who attempt to negotiate the personas they believe are expected of them. Ms. Katz may have failed to recognize similar issues with Alex, in our example at the beginning of the chapter.

As Noguera points out in his piece, researchers see a *variety* of responses to the many, often conflicting messages about what it means to be a minority student, and there is scholarly disagreement over the meaning of these responses. As you read, it may be helpful to think about these concepts as coping mechanisms that adolescents of color may use during the "encounter" phase of their racial identity development, in which students begin to understand the existence of racism and fold that understanding into their identity.

For another perspective on the variety of ways that adolescents develop their racial identity, in an excerpt from Beverly Daniel Tatum's chapter, "Critical Issues in Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American Identity Development" (Chapter 8 of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*), Tatum explains some ways in which Latino and Native American students seek to develop a racial identity throughout their adolescence in a society where they have been subject to racial and cultural oppression. Tatum focuses on high schoolers from each of these racial/ethnic groups in turn, identifying key issues that those students face when struggling to define themselves and determine what part their racial identity will play in that definition.

Stereotype threat. As you read about briefly in *Teaching As Leadership*, Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson have shown that students perform poorly when they believe that the task they're completing may confirm a negative stereotype about them. African-American students told that a standardized test was measuring their ability performed worse than African-American students told that a test was a "non-evaluative problem-solving task." The mere fact that standardized tests have a history of a racial performance gap, the researchers were able to conclude, negatively affected the African-American students' test-taking strategies; the students second-guessed themselves and worked inefficiently.⁷¹ Aaronson and Salinas have seen similar results with Latino students.⁷²

In a more recent study, Aaronson and Steele were able to induce poor math performance in white male students, who do not normally suffer a societal stereotype in that domain. This study showed that stereotype threat "is a predicament that stems from quite normal responses to the low and demeaning expectations that come to the individual in the form of negative stereotypes."⁷³

While the stereotype threat is not likely to disappear given the negative messages pervasive in our society, you can ensure that your classroom is a place where students are inundated with the images and achievements of people who look like them. Joshua Aronson (one of the psychologists involved in identifying the stereotype threat) and several of his colleagues have also documented the effects of teaching students about the malleable nature of intelligence, which leads students to discard society's messages about their purported deficiencies.⁷⁴ A third important strategy for curbing the effects of the stereotype threat is being clear about your expectations for success on all assignments and tests that you

⁷¹ Steele, C. M. & Aronson, J. "Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African-Americans." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol. 69, No. 5, 1995, pp. 797-811.

⁷² Salinas, M.F. & Aronson, J. *Stereotype Vulnerability, Attributional Ambiguity and Latino Underperformance*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the Western Psychological Association, April 1997.

⁷³ Aronson, Joshua, et al. "When White Men Can't Do Math: Necessary and Sufficient Factors in Stereotype Threat." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. Vol. 35, 1999, p. 44.

⁷⁴ <http://www.psychologymatters.org/aronson.html>, accessed 1/31/07.

give. Outlining exactly what students need to do to prepare for an assessment will help show students that it is their effort – rather than some race-based ability quotient – that will determine their score.

Disidentification. A related adolescent response is called “academic disidentification,” in which students who do not experience consistent academic success lose their investment in doing well because, if they were to pin their self-concept on good grades, they would constantly let themselves down. In order to preserve their dignity, they no longer identify academic success as an indicator of their self-worth. Researchers have found that African-American and Latino students disengage more often than their white and Asian counterparts, asserting that students are “disidentifying” from academic success as a defensive mechanism against the stereotype threat.⁷⁵ Tracking students in ossified ability groups, which often leads to rote-based, repetitive instruction, has contributed to disidentification; teachers need to ensure that all students receive an engaging, challenging curriculum and have the opportunity to advance quickly to new material when they have mastered certain objectives. By carefully gauging current performance levels and by matching assignments appropriately to have students experience consistent success while still maintaining high expectations, teachers may be able to counteract this debilitating phenomenon.

Oppositional behavior. According to some scholars, students in the “encounter” phase might also respond to poor treatment by deciding not to engage in the expected work. In his book, *I Won't Learn From You*, Herbert Kohl writes, “To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is not to learn and reject the strangers.”⁷⁶ Nilda Flores-Gonzalez synthesizes research from the 1980s and early 1990s on how a profound doubt in the American meritocracy can cause students to shut down:

Proponents of this view argue that students develop identities in opposition to school culture when they believe that high school graduation will not improve their socioeconomic status, and/or the behaviors required from academic achievement are deemed incompatible with their racial/ethnic or class identity. Low achievers are said to have developed a critical consciousness that rejects the false promises of the educational system. These students may have a high regard for education, but they do not believe that it is a means for social mobility. For them, hard work in school does not necessarily translate into success later in life because structural forces such as gender, class, and ethnicity circumscribe one’s opportunities.⁷⁷

So, how does a teacher prevent and reverse this “oppositional culture” in and for his or her students?

Students need support by having someone with whom to talk through concerns and help them see that they are not alone. Educators argue over the extent to which teachers should proactively bring up the ways in which students will face oppression growing up; some believe that children do not need to be reminded of the discrimination they may face in society. But teachers must support their students as they experience anxiety or frustration about bias and privilege in the outside world. Rather than simply telling Horatio Alger stories of people “picking themselves up by their bootstraps,” teachers can lend their ears to students’ frustrations, as well as develop forums and spaces in which students can discuss and ally on these issues together.

⁷⁵ Steele, Claude. “Race and the Schooling of African-American Americans.” *The Atlantic Monthly*. Vol. 269, No. 4, April 1992, pp. 68-78.

⁷⁶ Kohl, Herbert. “I Won’t Learn From You: Confronting Student Resistance.” *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice*. Milwaukee: Rethinking Our Schools, 1994, p. 134.

⁷⁷ Flores-Gonzalez, Nilda. *School Kids/Street Kids: Identity Development in Latino Students*. New York: Teachers College Pr., 2002, p. 8.

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In her essay from *Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*, Theresa Perry notes that success means somehow negotiating the dilemmas that characterize the notion of achievement for many students of color. Perry poses four questions that she believes students must be taught to ask themselves:

How do I commit myself to achieve, to work hard over time in school, if I cannot predict (in school or out of school) when or under what circumstances this hard work will be acknowledged and recognized?

How do I commit myself to do work that is predicated on a belief in the power of the mind, when African-American intellectual inferiority is so much a part of the taken-for-granted notions of the larger society that individuals in and out of school, even good and well-intentioned people, individuals who purport to be acting on my behalf, routinely register doubts about my intellectual competence?

How can I aspire to and work toward excellence when it is unclear whether or when evaluations of my work can or should be taken seriously?

Can I invest in and engage my full personhood, with all of my cultural formations, in my class, my work, my school if my teachers and the adults in the building are both attracted to and repulsed by these cultural formations—the way I walk, the way I use language, my relationship to my body, my physicality and so on?⁷⁸

These questions, Perry argues, require African-American students to summon extra emotional, social and physical strength to remain committed to success. She writes, “The task of achievement requires that you and others believe that the intellectual work that you engage in affirms you as a social being and is compatible with who you are.”⁷⁹

Such strength is difficult to maintain on your own, and students of color may avoid big competitions or gifted programs in which they do not see their peers included. Susan Asiyambi '01, now the Philadelphia Institute Director, taught fourth grade math in Newark, New Jersey. She describes what this looked like in her classroom:

One of my students, Aaliyah, was a very bright young girl. She was very strategic in her thinking and her ability to break problems down. Aaliyah was content with doing the minimum to get by because she had always done so. During class discussions, Aaliyah often questioned the use of committing hard work, knowing her background would always be a product that stifled her growth. Knowing that Aaliyah felt this way, I made sure to prove to her that she could actualize her dreams. I forced her to apply for summer programs and competitions. As she began this process, the pressure was on for her to focus and really dedicate time and energy to succeeding. Competing and working with others from different schools and backgrounds was just what Aaliyah needed. This was the first time she felt she could not only keep up, but do just as well as anyone else despite societal conditions and/or community and racial background.

⁷⁸ Perry, Theresa, et al. *Young, Gifted and Black*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003, p. 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 6.

The “acting white” hypothesis. You have already learned about some of the work by John Ogbu, who suggests that some minority students reject academic success because they would be seen as “acting white.” Tatum makes similar conclusions in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Other scholars have shown that successful African-American students deemphasized attributes that would signal their “Blackness” and asserted that race was not an important part of their identity.⁸⁰

While this may be true for some students, more recent studies have suggested that “racial/ethnic minorities do not necessarily associate school success with ‘Whiteness,’ nor are they subjected to peer pressure that leads to not doing well.”⁸¹ Flores-Gonzalez argues that it is not necessary to give up one’s background in order to be academically successful, indicating that students learn to manage both a “school” identity and a “home” identity at once and that these are not contradictory or incompatible.⁸² In a recent critique of the “acting white” hypothesis, the University of Pennsylvania’s Vinay Harpalani pointed to data that showed students who were judged to be in the “pre-encounter” phase of Cross’s racial

I will never forget the time one of my students told me I was the only white person they had met who they liked. It was devastating. Obviously I wanted my students to like me, but not at the exclusion of the rest of my race. We talked about why they felt that way, and I challenged them to think about whether they think they might like my parents or siblings. We talked about why we like people, and why we do not sometimes. We made it a continuing conversation.

Cate Reed, DC ‘00
Project Manager (via Broad Residency),
Pittsburgh Public Schools

identity development were less academically successful than those shown to have attitudes of the “internalization” stage. This means that students who more strongly associated themselves with positive African-American identity performed better than those who viewed themselves from a Eurocentric frame of reference.⁸³ Scholars have recently made similar arguments for encouraging native Spanish speakers to maintain their home language, rather than simply abandoning it for English.⁸⁴ Native American students, once asked to deny their heritage and adopt the goals and values of Western education, show progress in schools where children are encouraged and shown how to use Native knowledge and language while also pursuing national curriculum standards.⁸⁵

Harvard sociologist Prudence Carter suggests that, while some students of color may not wish to relinquish their own clothing, styles and language, they do not necessarily see their culture or race in opposition to academic success.⁸⁶ In fact, in one national study, scholars found that African-American students had higher aspirations than their white peers.⁸⁷ It may be that adults, looking at students who project an outward appearance that is different from white, middle-class “norms,” come to presume and perpetuate the idea that those students are not interested in success. Ask yourself: Are there certain assumptions you hold about what an intellectually curious student looks or sounds like?

⁸⁰ Fordham, S. “Racelessness as a Factor in Black Students’ School Success: Pragmatic Strategy or Pyrrhic Victory?” *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 58, No. 1, 1988, pp. 54-83.

⁸¹ Flores-Gonzalez, Nilda. *School Kids/Street Kids: Identity Development in Latino Students*. New York: Teachers College Pr., 2002, p. 9.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ <http://www.urbanedjournal.org/archive/Issue%201/Commentaries/comment0001.html>, accessed 7/1/2010. For a Miami-specific example refuting the “acting white” hypothesis, see <http://www.fiu.edu/~iei/index/working3.html>, accessed 7/1/2010.

⁸⁴ Nieto, Sonia. *Affirming Diversity, 4th ed.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2004, pp. 214-216.

⁸⁵ Lipka, Jerry. “Schooling for Self-Determination.” ERIC Digest, EDO-RC-01-12, January 2002.

⁸⁶ <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/inequality/Seminar/Papers/Carter.pdf>, accessed 7/1/2010.

⁸⁷ Ainsworth-Darnell, James W. and Downey, Douglas B. “Assessing the Oppositional Cultural Explanation for Racial/Ethnic Differences in School Performance.” *American Sociological Review*. Vol. 63, No. 4, August 1998, pp. 536-553.

How Racial Identity Affects Performance

Culturally specific challenges. While many of the aforementioned issues may cross racial lines, it is important to highlight that children from different racial groups face stigmas and challenges particular to their own experiences. For example, the “model minority myth,” which lumps Asian Americans together into a single group of super-intelligent, hard-working future scientists and mathematicians, creates unrealistic and limiting expectations and masks the very real problems of gangs, high dropout rates, and the more meaningful patterns of success and struggle apparent when you disaggregate “Asian-Americans” by country of origin. Asian-American children also face the problem of being seen as “perpetual foreigners,” rather than having their long and complex history as contributors to America affirmed in school.

In many immigrant groups, children must come to grips with school’s demands to assimilate (which often reject and demean their native language), while deciding where there is still a place for their own ethnicity. Native Americans, for whom school has a history of being an instrument of forced assimilation, face the additional challenge of a curriculum that often represents their identity as something primitive and museum-like rather than modern and relevant. Native American male adolescents also have a suicide rate that is more than 150 percent higher than the national average.⁸⁸ Many biracial or bicultural students face the challenge of a society that expects them to pick (or places them in) one race or the other, all the while not being fully accepted into either one. Indeed, the existing theories for racial identity development do not fully accommodate individuals of biracial backgrounds, given the complexities and individual circumstances involved.⁸⁹

It is crucial for you to investigate the particular challenges facing students in your school through additional reading, as well as conversations with colleagues and community members.

In first grade, Angel had more character than many of the adults I know. He often manipulated assignments to better highlight his interests. He carefully considered the topics of his journal entries and relentlessly researched new interests in the school library – seeking the supervision of adults who could answer his many questions and the partnership of his classmates to whom he could teach his newfound knowledge. Angel loved to talk – and in these conversations with adults and his peers, his English language fluency rapidly improved. One morning Angel came to school with an uncharacteristic crease across his brow. He greeted me, “Buenos dias maestra,” which was the first of what was to be an entire day of Spanish-only participation. My students often conducted their social conversations in Spanish, but Angel refused to participate in any class discussion that called for English responses. After school I pulled Angel aside to inquire about the shift. With prodding in English and then Spanish, he eventually revealed that he had had a dream that he had forgotten how to speak Spanish. Afraid that his dream would come true and that in turn, he would no longer be able to speak to his mother, he was determined to speak only in Spanish. At the mature age of 7 Angel was aware of the impact that learning academic English could have on his status in his family. At age 7, Angel was frightened to learn what his mother didn’t know.

Kate Sobel, Los Angeles '98
Principal, Camino Nuevo Charter Academy

⁸⁸ The Surgeon General’s Call To Action To Prevent Suicide, 1999.

<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calltoaction/calltoaction.htm>, accessed 7/1/2010.

⁸⁹ Root, Maria. “The Biracial Baby Boom: Understanding Ecological Constructions of Racial Identity in the 21st Century.” In *Racial and Ethnic Identity in School Practices: Aspects of Human Development*, by Sheers and Hollins, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Associates, 1999.

III. Implications for Teachers

You may feel daunted by the section you just read. There are so many forces that complicate the assumptions students of color make about their potential academic success. How can you as a teacher reverse it all?

Before the prospect of these psychological phenomena gets too overwhelming, it's important to start by acknowledging that many things are out of your control. In the next two years, you cannot stop America from pre-judging the abilities of students who we know can absolutely succeed, or Hollywood from perpetuating messages that stereotype our children and shake their confidence in themselves.

But you do control everything that goes on in your classroom. You control how you choose your instructional content and strategies, how you interpret and respond to your students' behaviors, how you communicate your confidence in your students, and how you address your students' own comments and feelings about race when they arise. Here are some initial strategies—that apply both to developing your classroom and to pushing your own thinking—to consider when creating a classroom that conveys that all students can achieve:

- **Scaffold instruction.** By starting with simpler concepts and building up, you can help students build confidence in their abilities by ensuring that you are analyzing assessments and developing instruction that meets students where they are. Students are far more likely to exert effort when they believe that they have a chance to succeed – a belief you can build by helping students experience smaller successes first.
- **Show your students how they can succeed in your classroom.** Be transparent about your criteria for assessments and your grading methods. This way, students can believe that their work in your class will be evaluated based on their effort, not on a race-based perception of their ability.
- **Show your students how they can succeed in the outside world.** Help students learn the steps they need to achieve their dreams. Some may not have the opportunity to take college tours – let alone know words like GRE, LSAT or MCAT, or the processes that go along with college and graduate school admissions. Expose your students to people of different professions, and ask these guests to share how they reached their positions. You'll not only be sharing some valuable strategies, but you'll be demonstrating that you believe they can be successful.
- **Do your research.** Don't know much about history? Deepen your understanding of your students' background and their past. Share what you learn with your students, and not just on Black History or Hispanic Heritage Month, but throughout your curriculum. Highlight the ways in which the past is laden with multicultural stories of intellectual curiosity and resistance through education. You'll be building a counter-narrative to the messages your students may be receiving from other sources. Along those lines, examine the perspective from which your textbooks and school celebrations view historical events. For example, you might challenge the traditional notion that Columbus "discovered" America by noting that indigenous people had lived in this hemisphere for centuries.

Having Community Meetings was the most effective method of researching my students' backgrounds and cultures. Giving the children the opportunity to interact in a respectful, group-building setting allows them to open up. Daily they reveal to me some insight – whether it is a colloquialism of the region and its meaning or their definition of love. During a Community Meeting they always educate me and one another.

Brianna Twofoot, Delta '04
Field Organizer, Maine Civil Liberties Union

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- **Look within.** Perhaps you have a very narrow conception of what a “good student” looks like. Just because students dress or speak in a certain way does not mean that they are not interested in success. Take a hard look at your own preconceived notions – and talk honestly with students – before making judgments about them.
- **Don’t hide from conversations about race.** Instead of saying “if you work hard, you will succeed” to students who communicate a lack of faith in the system, acknowledge the wrongs of the past and point out the ways in which people have resisted and overcome societal stigmas. Truly listen to your students and hear their concerns, without defensiveness. Call in “backup” in the form of community members or recent alumni from your school who can demonstrate the strength and perseverance that they used to be successful. When possible and appropriate, integrate lessons about race, identity and stereotypes into your curriculum. In one example, educator Linda Christensen had her students write poems in the style of Margaret Walker’s “For My People,” to respond to stereotypes head-on. You’ll find an article about Christensen’s “Lesson on Addressing Stereotypes” on pages 3-6 of the **Diversity, Community, & Achievement Toolkit**; this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖

IV. Conclusion: Building Supportive and Responsive Classrooms

This chapter has argued that, for students of color, racial identity represents a significant aspect of self-perception and self-esteem. This chapter and its accompanying articles aim to give you a broader understanding of the ways in which your students may be thinking about their racial identity – and the impact of their perceptions on their larger sense of self and, as a result, their academic performance.

At several stages of development, the teacher has the opportunity to help students navigate their self-understandings by being supportive and responsive in a number of ways. As a teacher of younger students, you can jumpstart the identity development process by affirming your students and their racial background through positive stories and explanations of human differences. For adolescents, you can counteract the degrading messages that influence students’ self-perceptions, critically examine biased and stereotyped texts, consistently communicate your confidence in your students’ abilities, and celebrate their rich intellectual heritage.

We have also brought up the racial identity development that you yourself may be going through. Depending on your current feelings about your own racial group, you may believe that there is no need to focus on racial-cultural differences. If that is the case, this chapter has hopefully spurred your thinking about the ways in which the psychology of racial identity makes a significant impact on teaching and learning.

Please pause in your reading and read “How Racial Identity Affects School Performance” by Pedro Noguera, which can be accessed by visiting the Pre-Institute Work page on the Institute Info Center within TFANet. Please also read both “The Early Years” and “Critical Issues in Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American Identity Development” by Beverly Daniel Tatum, which are found in the Related Readings section. 📖

“Cultural Learning Styles”: Should Students’ Culture Inform Instructional Choices?

Chapter Seven

- I. “Good Teaching Is Good Teaching” for Whom?
- II. General Principles of “Cultural Learning Styles” for Low-Income and Minority Students
- III. Group-Specific Theories and Their Critique
- IV. Conclusion: Treating Culture with Care

I. “Good Teaching Is Good Teaching” for Whom?

Among teacher educators in this country, there are two conflicting perspectives on the relevance of students’ culture to classroom decision-making. Probably the majority (and more traditional) view stresses that “good teaching is good teaching”—that the methods, strategies, and techniques that good teachers learn and master are equally valuable for students of a variety of cultures. This theory holds that “no special knowledge and skills other than the mainstream, traditional knowledge bases of teacher education are needed to train teachers for classrooms of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.”⁹⁰ The key to serving students of diverse backgrounds, according to this view, is simply vigorous and intense work, using the same techniques as you would with a non-diverse class.

Additional Readings

After this chapter, please read the following selections found on the Institute Info Center within TFANet:

- *Speaking, Relating and Learning: A Study of Hawaiian Children at Home and at School* (abstract) by Steven Bogs, Karen Watson-Gegeo, and G. McMillen
- “An Indian Father’s Plea” by Robert Lake (Medicine Grizzlybear)
- “American Indian/Alaskan Native Learning Styles: Research and Practice” from ERIC Digest by Karen Swisher
- “Culture, Identity, and Learning,” by Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode from *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*

A competing perspective, however, argues that what works for White, middle-class students (which, some would argue, represents the conventional canon of teaching methods taught to new teachers) may not necessarily work for less affluent, minority students. This research on “cultural learning styles” (which was in large part originated by African-American scholars in the 70’s and 80’s who were concerned that schools were not meeting the needs of children of color), holds that “there really is a body of special knowledge, skills, processes, and experiences that is different from the knowledge bases of most traditional teacher education programs and that is essential for preparing teachers to be successful with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations.”⁹¹ According to this view, teachers must learn the ways in which students’ cultures impact their learning styles and must study students’ cultural backgrounds because “matching the contextual conditions for learning to the cultural experiences of the learner increases task engagement and hence increases task performance.”⁹²

⁹⁰ Smith, G. Pritchey, *Common Sense about Uncommon Knowledge: The Knowledge Bases for Diversity*. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. 1998. p. 17.

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 18.

⁹² Allen, B. A., & Butler, L. “The effects of music and movement opportunity on the analogical reasoning performance of African American and White school children: A preliminary study.” *Journal of Black Psychology*, 22(3), 1996, p. 317.

“Cultural Learning Styles”

Education scholar Geneva Gay argues that the nexus of cultural influence is a student’s “learning style,” shaping the way children receive and process information most effectively. “[T]eachers must understand cultural characteristics of different ethnic, racial, and social groups so they can develop instructional practices that are more responsive to cultural pluralism. Cultural characteristics of particular significance in this undertaking are communication styles, thinking styles, value systems, socialization processes, relational patterns, and performance styles.”⁹³ Thus, the theory holds, by knowing about a student’s culture, one can make predictions about the student’s receptivity to various styles of teaching.

Note that this perspective does not discard traditional teacher training models altogether. Rather, it holds that those conventional knowledge bases (instructional planning, classroom management, etc.) must be supplemented with additional cultural and social knowledge to most effectively lead students of color.

Proponents of culture’s power to inform instructional choices point to examples of classrooms and schools in which educators have studied students’ cultural norms and then tailored instructional methods to align with those norms. Consider, for example, a well-known study conducted in Hawaii:

One graphic illustration of these effects is the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP). Several researchers have been documenting the effects of this language arts program for young native Hawaiian children. The results have been phenomenal. When the communication, interpersonal, and learning styles of native Hawaiian students were employed in the classroom, both their social and academic skills (including time on task, attention span, quality and quantity of participation, school attendance, reading ability, and language arts skills) improved significantly. Reading test scores increased from the 13th to the 67th percentile in four years.⁹⁴

[For more on studies of native Hawaiian children’s learning styles, and for a more thorough model of this “cultural learning style” reasoning, please read the short abstract *Speaking, Relating and Learning: A Study of Hawaiian Children at Home and at School.*]

For some, the notion that we can generalize about the learning styles of an entire ethnic or racial group is mistaken, if not offensive. Other skeptics of this culture-focused approach do not question the success of the applied teaching methods (for the numbers are unquestionably impressive); rather, they contend that these same methods when applied deliberately in any classroom with any group of students would produce good results. As one researcher labels it, “culturally contextualized instructional variability” (meaning an instructional approach that considers cultural propensities but also greatly varies instructional methods) may hold great promise of academic achievement for both minority and White students.

In this chapter, we will explore both sides of this debate in hopes of giving you the knowledge you need to decide whether “cultural learning styles” will present a net-benefit to your students. We will begin this discussion with a general overview of some of the lessons that theories of “cultural learning styles” claim to teach us. Then we will simultaneously consider (a) some specific guidelines these theories suggests for teaching African-American, Latino, and Native American students and (b) some common critiques of the idea that different ethnic and cultural groups have different “cultural learning styles.” Finally, we still step back and discuss the implications of this debate for your classroom.

⁹³ Gay, Geneva. *At the Essence of Learning: Multicultural Education*. West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi, 1994, p. 2.

⁹⁴ Smith, G. Pritch, *Common Sense about Uncommon Knowledge: The Knowledge Bases for Diversity*. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1998, p. 19.

II. General Principles of “Cultural Learning Styles” for Low-Income and Minority Students

Setting aside for the moment the scholarly and practical disagreements about whether or not a teacher should consider a student’s culture, race, ethnicity, or gender in his or her instructional planning, let us briefly survey the lessons purportedly learned by the multicultural education researchers about how to most effectively teach students of color or low-income students. What techniques or strategies are reported to be more effective with our students than with middle-class, White students?

One general finding of this research has been that minority students (which in most studies include African-American or Latino students) generally do not respond as well to traditional lecture formats as do middle-class White students. As one reviewer put it, “[I]f research has shown anything at all, it has shown that dull didactic instruction consisting only of teacher talk and seatwork is not effective with most minority students.”⁹⁶ Such findings counsel teachers of students of color to use more interactive methods than lectures and worksheets.

Cooperative learning is often cited as an excellent alternative to “dull didactic instruction” for minority and low-income students:

Cooperative learning leads to more positive racial attitudes for all students, more interracial friendship choices, and academic gains for students of color (especially Hispanics and African-Americans). It has no apparent effects on the academic achievement of Anglo students, since they perform about the same in cooperative and competitive learning environments. Cooperative, cross-racial learning also increases student instruction, self-esteem, and ability to empathize.⁹⁷

Are Teachers Who Share Their Students’ Race or Ethnicity More Effective?

One possible implication of the “cultural learning style” perspective is that teachers who share their students’ culture are more effective. Although a teacher who shares his or her students’ culture may more quickly understand and appreciate that culture, our experience over the years working with diverse groups of new teachers has demonstrated that teachers who do not share their students’ culture certainly have the ability to appreciate and engage with that culture in ways that are beneficial to their students’ learning. As one researcher explained, “White teachers are more likely than Black teachers to be out of cultural sync with the Black students they teach. These conclusions do not ignore the fact that some White teachers are excellent teachers of Black children or that some Black teachers are ineffective with Black children...”⁹⁵ We also believe that there are other factors at play that make teacher diversity important. Students should, for example, have educated and responsible role models who share their racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds; such role models can serve as an important source of motivation for students. At the same time, students need to have role models who are diverse in every respect—race, class, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, and other forms of diversity—for this exposure will help break down students’ assumptions about people from different backgrounds. Thus, while we believe that this country needs more teachers who represent the identities of minority and low-income students, we are confident—given the fact that in our experience at Teach For America we have seen teachers of all different backgrounds with students of all different backgrounds make dramatic academic gains—that one does not have to share the same race, class, gender, or orientation identity as one’s students to successfully lead students to dramatic academic gains.

A related strand of research has found that “cross-age peer teaching and role modeling are effective strategies that are significant factors in the lives of minority students who have overcome the odds to

⁹⁵ Irvine, Jacqueline Jordan. *Black Students and School Failure: Policies, Practice, and Prescriptions*. Oxford: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1990, p. 61.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 60

⁹⁷ Gay, Geneva. “A Synthesis of Scholarship in Multicultural Education,” North Central Regional Educational Library, p. 18. Available online at <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrshp/le0qay.htm>, accessed 7/1/2010.

“Cultural Learning Styles”

become successful academic achievers.”⁹⁸ (Below, we will consider more specifically the reasons researchers believe these techniques are more effective.)

As mentioned above, a primary critique of this line of reasoning is not that these techniques are ineffective, but that it is wrong to think of them as effective with only one subset of students. In fact, especially when we consider teaching techniques for a group as ill-defined as “minority” or “low-income,” some of the same scholars who develop these ideas assert that “much of the present research indicates that effective strategies for minority students—except for the deadly combination of didactic teacher talk (lecturing, asking simple questions, and giving instructions) and pencil-paper seatwork—are also effective strategies for most White middle class students.”⁹⁹

III. Group-Specific Theories and Their Critique

More targeted suggestions for teachers come from research that focuses on a more distinct cultural group (than the catch-all notion of “minority” or “low-income” students). African-American and Latino students in particular have been the subjects of many studies looking for a connection between culture and learning style, and a number of studies have claimed to have discovered that certain teaching methods are particularly effective with those groups.

While these studies take many forms and are conducted in many contexts, they are similar in their attempts to (a) identify meaningful commonalities in a given cultural group and (b) discern the impacts of those commonalities on how members of that group best learn. They also have in common some degree of controversy; some scholars vehemently deny that the concept of “cultural learning styles” has any meaning to educators.

Consider, for example, some of the reported findings on the best ways to teach African-American students.¹⁰⁰ We are told that “Many African-American students “tune in” more in a classroom that encourages interpersonal interaction, multiple activities, and multiple modality preferences than in quiet classrooms in which students are supposed to pay attention to tasks more than sound, and only one thing at a time (Shade, 1989).”¹⁰¹ Shade distinguishes between two different cognitive styles: analytical and synergetic. Her primary thesis is that schools are designed for an “analytical style” of learning while most African-American students (and she extrapolates to minority students including Latino or Native American) students tend to function in a “synergetic style:”

Analytical learners are competitive and independent, and they focus well on impersonal tasks. They learn well through print, focus best on one task at a time, and work in a step-by-step sequence. Synergetic learners, on the other hand, prefer to work cooperatively rather than independently; they do not block out their peers, but rather attempt to integrate personal relationships into learning tasks. Synergetic learners are stimulated by multiple activities and become bored when only one thing is happening. They often prefer kinesthetic and tactile involvement as well as discussion.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Smith, G. Pritchey, *Common Sense about Uncommon Knowledge: The Knowledge Bases for Diversity*. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1998, p. 66.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ Of course, not all Black students are “African-American.” Consider, for example, the degree to which West Indians and other immigrants from the Caribbean should or should not be lumped together with these generalizations.

¹⁰¹ Sleeter, Christine and Grant, Carl. *Making Choices for Multicultural Education: Five Approaches to Race, Class, and Gender*. New York: Wiley Text Books, 2002, p. 66.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p. 55.

Native American “Cultural Learning Styles”?

As with African-American and Latino students, some would say that the notion of any common “Native American culture” is a fallacy given all of the rich, independent cultures represented in that group. And yet, a considerable body of research does claim that its results can be extrapolated from the particular tribal group studied to Native Americans generally. Some of the seminal research, moreover, has focused more on the *inappropriateness* of conventional teaching strategies for Native American children, rather than the particular teaching methods that are uniquely suited for Native Americans.

For her 1983 work, *The Invisible Culture*, researcher Susan Urmstrom Philips studied Native American children in Warm Springs, Oregon and observed that they generally hesitated to participate in large- and small-group recitations. On the other hand, they were more talkative than non-Indian children when they started interactions with the teacher or worked on student-led group projects. According to Philips, those “learning styles” were directly linked to a set of cultural norms that includes observation, careful listening, supervised participation, and individualized self-correction or testing.¹⁰⁵ A similar description of cultural patterns had been previously reported by other researchers studying classrooms attended by Sioux and Cherokee children.

Some scholars have latched on to “whole language” instruction as particularly aligned with traditional Native American culture, on the grounds that it is “compatible with the style of Native American children because whole language emphasizes meaning and process over product, uses cooperative work, capitalizes on oral language, and integrates subject areas. These features are compatible with Native American students’ preference for communal learning and personal meaning, use of time, and holistic world view (Kasten, 1992).”¹⁰⁶ For a brief overview of some of that research, please read “American Indian/Alaskan Native Learning Styles: Research and Practice” from ERIC Digest by Karen Swisher. In addition, read “An Indian Father’s Plea” by Robert Lake (Medicine Grizzlybear).

Similar findings are suggested for Latino students. Teachers are advised to create heterogeneous (rather than homogenous) learning groups on the theory that such methods can help their Latino students feel valued and feel that social pressures have been lifted, leading them to perform better.¹⁰³ This type of grouping should be utilized often, the theory goes, as Latino culture places an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition when working towards the attainment of goals.¹⁰⁴

As just mentioned, not all educators are bought into, or comfortable with, this line of research. For a number of reasons, some teachers and scholars bristle at the notion that Black, or Latino, or Native American students need different forms of instruction to succeed.

First, as mentioned before, many educators look at these lists of teaching methods and, instead of seeing a list of strategies tailored to a particular group, they see a list of strategies that all teachers in all classrooms, no matter what the cultural make up of the class, would benefit from.

Second, many educators and scholars would argue (and some researchers have reported) that this whole line of reasoning is shaky because of the great variation in “culture” within these supposedly culturally-defined groups. In fact, some commentators go so far as to argue that

over-zealous attempts at “cultural learning styles” amount to cultural bias themselves:

Instructional materials frequently reflect cultural bias through one size fits all generalization, by implying that there is a single Hispanic, African, Asian, and Native culture. This view fails to recognize that considerable cultural diversity exists within each of these groups and that even within a cultural subgroup, culture changes over time [Escamilla, 1993].¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Trueba, Enrique T. and Lilia Bartolome. “The Education of Latino Students: Is School Reform Enough?” *ERIC Digest*, No. 123, July 1997. (ED 410 367)

¹⁰⁴ Griggs, Shirley and Rita Dunn. “Hispanic-American Students and Learning Style.” *ERIC Digest*, May 1996. (ED 393 607)

¹⁰⁵ Philips, S. *The Invisible Culture*. New York: Longman Press, 1983.

¹⁰⁶ Sleeter, Christine and Grant, Carl. *Making Choices for Multicultural Education; Five Approaches to Race, Class, and Gender*. New York: Wiley Text Books, 2002, p. 66.

¹⁰⁷ Abdal-Haqq, Ismat, “Culturally Responsive Curriculum.” *ERIC Digest*, June 1994. (ED 370 936)

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Is there enough of a generalized “African-American culture” to inform instruction? Are there enough common characteristics of Latino or Hispanic students to justify attempts to make generalities about how to teach these students? Or, is this research at its foundation a disrespectful and misguided attempt to lump together many distinct, rich, independent cultures into one, or to over-generalize about individuals within a group, when the differences among individuals within a group may exceed those among groups? One team of researchers who studied the education-related activities of four ethnic groups in Boston (Puerto Ricans, African-Americans, Chinese Americans, and Irish Americans) felt compelled to begin the summary of their research with the caveat that “[d]ifferences within racial or ethnic groups may be greater than differences between them on all of these family factors, including support for their children’s education, use of extended families and community networks, and involvement in schools.”¹⁰⁹

Finally, other teachers and scholars are dissatisfied with this “cultural learning style” approach to teaching because they see its process and results lending themselves to racially and culturally divisive thinking. As one commentator argues, there may be limitations and dangers to the culture-focused approach:

The dangers come from the likelihood that such knowledge will contribute only stereotyped categories and labels that then become barriers to understanding the behavior of a particular child working on a particular school task, and contribute to lowered expectations about that child’s possible achievement.¹¹⁰

Some academics and educators go so far as to consider these attempts to discern education-meaningful commonalities to be dangerously close to traditional racism. School Psychology professor Craig Frisby, for example, in his article “One Giant Step Backward: Myths of Black Cultural Learning Styles,” surveys all of the “learning characteristics” of Black children that various researchers have claimed to find in their research. Frisby argues that in addition to relatively neutral learning characteristics (i.e., “prefers cooperative learning situations”), that list is rife with negative stereotypes of Black children, (i.e., “behaviors appear impulsive” and “not motivated by achievement related goals”) that actually only perpetuate damaging lowered expectations. To make his point that this is little more than *nouveaux-*

Theories on Teaching Girls and Boys

While gender has not been our focus in this chapter, it is worth noting that in addition to these studies on how students of different racial and ethnic groups best learn, there are also instructional strategies that are supposedly more appropriate/effective with girls than boys, and vice versa. For example, some research indicates that boys may be more interested in objects and things while girls tend to focus on people and relationships; some teachers use these basic tenets to drive instructional decisions or to allow for differentiation of a lesson based on gender to ensure that boys and girls are both able to access the information. One study by Dr. Michael Gurian, author of *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*, suggested that teachers may want to take care to ensure girls have a variety of leadership roles in the classroom during learning activities. Also, since girls tend to express their emotions with words rather than actions, they could benefit from more writing assignments or opportunities throughout all subjects. Of course, not every researcher in the areas of education or child development agrees that it is necessary to teach boys and girls in different ways; some have found that it can do more harm than good to girls if educators continue to expect of them what society has, and that teaching to gender stereotypes can only serve to reinforce them.¹⁰⁸

For more information on the differences in learning styles between girls and boys, please see the **Diversity, Community, & Achievement Toolkit** (p. 7: “Resources for Gender Equity in the Classroom”); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖

¹⁰⁸ From “Parenting Debates” section of Parent Soup website. <http://parenting.ivillage.com/>, accessed 7/1/2010.

¹⁰⁹ Hidalgo, Nitza m. et al., “Research on Families, Schools and Communities: A Multicultural Perspective.” Published in Banks, James A. and Cherry Banks (eds.) *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*. New York: MacMillan, 1995, p. 498.

¹¹⁰ Cazden, C. B., and Mehan, H. “Principles from sociology and anthropology: Context, code, classroom, and culture.” In M.C. Reynolds (Ed.). *Knowledge Base for the Beginning Teacher*. New York: Pergamon, 1989, pp. 54-55.

racism, Frisby puts side-by-side two quotes: one from a modern day proponent of the notion of a Black cultural learning style and one from a nineteenth century, overtly racist education commentator. To Frisby, the juxtaposition of these two (arguably similar) perspectives makes his point that this line of thinking will do more harm than good for students:

To characterize Afro-Americans as culturally different from Euro-Americans is not graphic enough. To the extent that the Black experience reflects a traditional West African cultural ethos, the two frames of reference are noncommensurable. There are fundamental incompatibilities between them: they are not quite polar opposites, but they are almost dialectically related. . . . This incommensurability makes it difficult to put Black cultural reality in the service of attainment in Euro-American cultural institutions, such as schools. The ideology that informs those institutes is a profound negation of the most central attributes of African culture.

From Boykin, A.W.

“The triple quandary and the schooling of Afro-American children.”

In U. Neisser (ed.) *The school achievement of minority children: new perspectives*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986, pp. 57-92.

The ground of distinction . . . is one of races, not of colors, merely. The distinction is one which the All-wise creator has seen fit to establish and it is founded deep in the physical, mental and moral natures of the two races. No legislation, no social customs, can efface this distinction. . . . We maintain that the true interests of both races require that they should be kept distinct. Amalgamation is degradation. We would urge our brethren of the African race, the duty of cultivating the genuine virtues peculiar to that race.

From Crowell, W., Ingraham, J.W., & Kimball, D.
“Extracts from the majority report on the caste schools.” *The Liberator*, Vol. 16, No. 34, 1846.

Thus, to some scholars and educators, the downsides of attempting to discern universal cultural generalizations about certain racial or ethnic groups are simply not worth the risk of perpetuating negative stereotypes. These individuals believe that “[I]t is high time that BCLS (Black cultural learning style) models be laid to rest. Failure to do so may result in the realization that, instead of making significant steps forward, we have indeed made one giant step backward.”¹¹¹

IV. Conclusion: Treating Culture with Care

What are your reactions to these criticisms? Given the benefits and risks of utilizing cultural learning styles, what approach do you think you will take? To what degree, if any, will you tailor your teaching methods based on generalizations you make about how African-American, or Latino, or Native American students best learn? We encourage you to engage in discussions of these complex questions this summer with your instructors and co-workers.

As you have heard repeatedly in these various training texts, excellent teachers get to know their students. Knowing your students’ cultures and backgrounds, individually and collectively, is an important part of that process, and getting to know your students as individuals is, ultimately, the most effective


¹¹¹ Frisby, C.L. “One giant step backward: Myths of Black cultural learning styles.” *School Psychology Review*, Vol. 22, 1993, pp. 535-557.

“Cultural Learning Styles”

means of adjusting your methods to maximize each student’s learning. The degree to which “cultural learning styles” are a part of that calculation is a difficult question that you must continue to explore in your teaching practice.

To provide you with an additional perspective on the complexities of this issue, please read an excerpt of the book, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. This chapter, titled “Culture, Identity, and Learning,” focuses on the dangers of *not* appreciating students’ culture, race, or ethnicity in the classroom. Nieto encourages teachers to reject the “color-blind” mentality that ignores students’ culture. And, on the complex question of instructional decision-making, Nieto comes down squarely on the side of using one’s knowledge of students’ culture to affect instructional planning and delivery. For Nieto, this issue is closely related to the notion of differentiation: like any good teacher who differentiates a classroom based on multiple intelligences or different learning modalities, Nieto argues those practices can be applicable to cultural differences, if a teacher keeps in mind the all-important individual differences among students.

As you consider this chapter and Nieto’s perspective, think about what you already know and do not know about the culture and background of the students whom you will be teaching. How will you improve that knowledge? In what ways, if at all, can you imagine using it to improve your effectiveness as a teacher?

Once again, please stop at this point to read four short selections or articles, which have all been mentioned throughout what you just read: Abstract of *Speaking, Relating, and Learning: A Study of Hawaiian Children at Home and at School* by Boggs, Watson-Gegeo, and McMillen; “An Indian Father’s Plea” by Robert Lake; “American Indian/Alaskan Native Learning Styles” by Swisher; and “Culture, Identity, and Learning” by Nieto and Bode. These selections can be accessed by visiting the Pre-Institute Work page on the Institute Info Center within TFA Net. 

Multicultural Education

Chapter Eight

- I. What Is “Multicultural Education”?
- II. “But Can They Do Math?”—Multicultural and Equitable Education
- III. So What Does “Multicultural Education” Mean in My Classroom
- IV. Conclusion

Thus far, we have discussed several of the important “knowledge bases” that teachers must develop in order to harness the potential of diversity as a path to student achievement. After the introduction to “dynamics of difference and sameness” in Chapter Four, we explored in Chapter Five the importance of learning about one’s self—one’s own biases and privileges—as a means of maintaining high expectations for our students. In Chapter Six, we considered students’ and teachers’ racial identity development, and in the last chapter we considered the lessons suggested by, and debate surrounding, the idea that students’ cultures should influence a teacher’s instructional methods.

Additional Readings

Along with this chapter, please take a few minutes to read the following selection found on the Institute Info Center within TFANet:

- “Profoundly Multicultural Questions” by Sonia Nieto, from *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 60 No. 4, December 2002/ January 2003, pp 6-10

In this chapter, we step back to approach the practice of “multicultural education” more broadly. Over the past several decades, a body of knowledge and teaching methods that falls under that heading has developed—a body of knowledge that is meant to improve teachers’ abilities to lead their students to academic success and personal growth. Next, we will consider what is meant by “multicultural education” and explore some of the specific ways that teachers can implement its principles in the classroom.

I. What Is “Multicultural Education”?

In the most general sense, multicultural education is an approach to teaching that values diversity in the classroom—diversity in content, methods, perspectives, educators, students, and cultures. Being a multicultural educator means embracing your students’ and others’ cultural diversity as a means of nurturing your students’ academic and personal growth.

Of course, within this broad framework, “[m]ulticultural education means different things to different people”¹¹² (and it is worth noting that we will be able to explore only a small slice of that complex network of meanings here). Given its broad definitions, teachers implement “multicultural education” in a variety of ways:

Some definitions rely on the cultural characteristics of diverse groups, while others emphasize social problems (particularly those associated with oppression), political power, and the reallocation of economic resources. Some restrict their focus to people of color, while others include all major groups that are different in any way from mainstream Americans. Other definitions limit multicultural education to characteristics

¹¹² Gay, Geneva. “A Synthesis of Scholarship in Multicultural Education.” North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. Urban Educatino Program, 1994. <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrshp/le0gay.htm>, accessed 7/10/2010.

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of local schools, and still others provide directions for school reform in all settings regardless of their characteristics.¹¹³

Some of the Defining Motivations of Multicultural Education. Perhaps the most meaningful way to come to grips with the rather expansive scope of approaches and practices that make up the notion of “multicultural education” is to consider some of the various reasons that educators incorporate those approaches into their classrooms. While we will save the most important motivation—increasing instructional effectiveness—for last, here we will briefly review some of other the reasons that teachers incorporate multicultural education into their classroom. Education expert Geneva Gay, in her survey of research on and the parameters of multicultural education called “A Synthesis of Scholarship in Multicultural Education,” helpfully delineates various purposes of multicultural education as follows:

Developing Ethnic and Cultural Literacy. In some cases, exploring and engaging diverse cultures is valued for the content of that knowledge. As Gay explains, in this way, students “learn about the historical backgrounds, languages, cultural characteristics, contributions, critical events, significant individuals, and social, political, and economic conditions of various majority and minority ethnic groups,” including those that may have traditionally been excluded from texts and lessons.

Personal Development. Another value of multicultural education is that—especially when those otherwise-underrepresented groups are brought into texts and lessons—students are offered more opportunity to see positive representations of aspects of themselves, leading students to “greater self-understanding, positive self-concepts, and pride in one’s ethnic identity.” Educators stress that these personal development benefits directly translate to academic achievement benefits as students are more inclined to be motivated to work hard and succeed.

Attitudes and Value Clarification. Another intention of multicultural education is to better prepare students for living in a diverse community. For this purpose, the “intent is to teach youths to respect and embrace ethnic pluralism, to realize that cultural differences are not synonymous with deficiencies or inferiorities, and to recognize that diversity is an integral part of the human condition and U.S. life.”

Multicultural Social Competence. Closely related to the previous purpose, another sub-intention of multicultural education is to teach students concrete techniques for interacting with people who are different from themselves. This idea extrapolates to a whole range of important academic and analytical skills and is achieved “by teaching skills in cross cultural communication, interpersonal relations, perspective taking, contextual analysis, understanding alternative points of view and frames of reference, and analyzing how cultural conditions affect values, attitudes, beliefs, preferences, expectations, and behaviors.”

In addition to these classroom motivations for multicultural education, many educators and scholars point to extra-classroom purposes, including the broader quest for educational equity and excellence and personal empowerment for social reform. These “social change” motivations focus on the long-term impact of developing students who will, through their lives, help to improve society by eradicating such social ills as racism, sexism and classism. Such teachers see themselves as those engaged “in the ongoing struggle to advance social justice for the various groups who fail to get their adequate share of resources and decision-making power in the larger society.”¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Montecions, Carmen and Francisco A. Rios. “Assessing Preservice Teachers’ Zones of Concern and Comfort in Multicultural Education.” *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Summer 1999, Vol. 26, No. 3.

As mentioned previously, while all of these various motivations for multicultural education are important to understanding what it is and why it is important, the ultimate purpose of multicultural education explains why we stress its methods to new corps members—multicultural education can be a means of increasing your effectiveness as an instructional leader in your classroom.

The Bottom Line—Multicultural Education Drives Student Growth and Achievement. By engaging and appreciating diverse cultures and perspectives in the classroom, teachers broaden the menu of possible connections to students that can be leveraged into greater, more efficient teaching and learning. For example, cultural learning styles (as discussed in Chapter Seven) may be considered a component of multicultural education, and its proponents claim that teachers are more effective when they align their methods with the learning propensities of his or her students' cultures. Moreover, by creating an atmosphere of achievement that is inclusive of all cultures and perspectives, a teacher helps students overcome some of the challenges to hard work and learning (lack of motivation, low expectations, low self-esteem) that may hold them back. As Gay explains,

Multicultural education can improve mastery of reading, writing, and mathematical skills; subject matter content; and intellectual process skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and conflict resolution by providing content and techniques that are more meaningful to the lives and frames of reference of ethnically different students. Using ethnic materials, experiences, and examples as the contexts for teaching, practicing, and demonstrating mastery of academic and subject matter skills increases the appeal of the tools of instruction, heightens the practical relevance of the skills to be learned, and improves students' time on task. This combination of conditions leads to greater focused efforts, task persistence, skill mastery, and academic achievement (Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1985; Garcia, 1982; Boggs, WatsonGrege, & McMillen, 1985).¹¹⁵

There is a growing body of evidence that directly links multicultural education to improved teacher effectiveness and student achievement.¹¹⁶ One study, for example, found favorable results in a pre-school program that integrated material on African American culture throughout the curriculum.¹¹⁷ Another found that elements of African and other cultural traditions were useful for teaching complex math concepts to urban children.¹¹⁸ Another researcher looked at three elementary programs for Hispanic children who were not English-proficient, and discovered that the math, reading, and language scores of students in bilingual and multi-culturally-integrated English As a Second Language (ESL) programs were significantly superior to scores of students enrolled in bilingual ESL without the multicultural integration.¹¹⁹ (Note that these approaches are somewhat different from the "cultural learning style" approaches debated in the previous chapter; here the focus is on culturally diverse and representative materials as springboards for learning, rather than on students' learning styles.)

In addition to the direct applicability of diverse cultures to the instructional process as described in these studies, research suggests that multicultural education leads to greater learning because it creates a more comfortable, inclusive, supportive environment where students feel validated, and where their race, ethnicity, gender and other identities are respected and valued. Students are said to be better positioned to take the academic risks necessary for intensive learning.

¹¹⁵ Gay, Geneva. "A Synthesis of Scholarship in Multicultural Education." North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, p. 13.

¹¹⁶ Web, Michael. "Multicultural Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools." ERIC Digest, Number 67. (ED 327 813) Available online at <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9218/secondary.htm>, accessed 7/1/2010.

¹¹⁷ Hale-Benson, J. "Visions for children: African American early childhood education program." ERIC Digest, 1989. (ED 270 235)

¹¹⁸ Zaslavsky, C. "Integrating mathematics with the study of cultural traditions." Paper presented to the 6th Annual International Conference on Mathematical Education, Budapest, Hungary: July 1988. (ED 303 540)

¹¹⁹ Fulton-Scott, M. "Bilingual multicultural education vs. integrated and non-integrated ESL instruction." *NAME Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1983, pp. 1-12.

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II. “But Can They Do Math?”—Multicultural and Equitable Education

This core purpose of multicultural education—to improve students’ learning and teachers’ instruction—highlights a certain tension in the implementation of multicultural methods. As important as it is to incorporate multicultural education into your classroom, you must do so not at the *expense* of other areas of learning, but rather for the *benefit* of those other areas of learning.

As you contemplate your own approach to multicultural education in your classroom, an important principle to remember is that multicultural education—like this diversity text—is ultimately a means to the end of academic achievement. Thus, as the instructional leader of your classroom, you must try to take advantage of synergies between multicultural education methods and your students’ needs for intense instruction in academic skills.

Consider the repercussions if this balance is unsettled. On the one hand, a teacher who views multicultural education as the ultimate goal of his or her classroom might end the year with self-confident, culturally aware students who cannot read. On the other hand, a teacher who ignores the strategies and benefits of multicultural education altogether could easily end the year not reaching the students’ reading goals because students have not become as invested in the goals themselves as they would have if the classroom had more inclusive.

Along with this chapter, you are asked to read an essay called “Profoundly Multicultural Questions,” by Sonia Nieto, one of the country’s leading thinkers on and proponents of multicultural education. Nieto ponders the need for multicultural education that complements rather than replaces rigorous, effective teaching of basic academic skills, while contemplating the all-important question posed by one of her friends who had observed an innovative multicultural program: “But can they do math?”

As you read Nieto’s essay, think about this question yourself. If you are one who thinks you may tend toward an emphasis on multicultural education to the exclusion of basic academic skills, how will you check that tendency in order to assure that you are using multicultural education techniques to *reach*, not replace, your academic goals? If you are one who may naturally tend to focus on academic skills to the exclusion of diverse materials and perspectives, how will you ensure that you are reaping the education benefits of multicultural education for your students? How will you ensure the right integration of academic skills and valuing diversity so that your students can, in fact, “do math?”

The language my students speak is vital and valuable part of who they are, where they come from, and what makes the Mississippi Delta unique. But the reality of life is that the language they speak is not the language that gives them access to power. As my student Ken pointed out, “If this test was in my language, I’d get a 100.” And he’s probably right. But I know and my students know that power is controlled by those who can speak ‘formal’ English. My students, colleagues, and I make a point of speaking only ‘formal’ English in the classroom and in the office. Our reading is more varied. We read authors who speak in a very similar style to my students and also those who speak in a more ‘formal’ manner. We talk very candidly about using the right language at the right time. The longer I’ve lived in the Delta, the more local language I’ve been able to pick up. Frequently, in the cafeteria or on the streets I impress my students with words I’ve learned from them. But most of all, I make sure that they know that the language they speak at home is not bad, wrong, or incorrect. My students’ language holds a rich history and they need to know that.

Amy Charpentier, Delta ‘02
Social Studies Teacher, KIPP Delta Collegiate High School and KIPP through College Counselor

III. So What Does “Multicultural Education” Mean in My Classroom?

Each of us could probably quickly brainstorm a whole list of somewhat atomized ways to annex multicultural methods into our classroom practices—we could collect and use articles from newspapers and magazines that deal with one or more groups, make maps showing origins of various groups, maintain a multicultural calendar, learn songs in different languages, and incorporate articles and texts from diverse authors, to name a few.¹²⁰ But how does a teacher systemically create a classroom that values diversity and that benefits at all levels from the incorporation of multicultural education?

The fact is that translating the various definitions and motivations for multicultural education into actual practices and behaviors in your classroom takes considerable planning and work. And as mentioned above, we believe that each new teacher must develop his or her own approach to these issues based on the unique circumstances of his or her background, classroom, school, and community. That being said, there are five general methods for implementing multicultural education that teachers should consider:

- (1) Recognize and appreciate the particular cultures and backgrounds represented in your classroom through you and your students.
- (2) Make recognition and appreciation of diverse background, cultures, and perspectives (including those not represented by you or your students) a constant theme of your classroom.
- (3) Consider the potential insights of research on the “cultural learning style” of your students.
- (4) Teach and model norms of positive, inclusive interactions among members of the class.
- (5) Evaluate materials for their inclusiveness and cultural relevance.

Below, we’ll expound on each of these aspects of multicultural education in turn.

METHOD #1: Recognize and appreciate the particular cultures and backgrounds represented in your classroom by you and your students. One of your charges as the instructional leader of your classroom is to enter an ongoing process of learning about the backgrounds and cultures of the students you are teaching. As you do, you will inevitably encounter in your instructional planning various means of highlighting or celebrating those backgrounds and cultures represented in your classroom. These means might be as simple as building a classroom library that includes books involving the cultures, backgrounds and identities represented by your second graders, or constantly collecting and periodically sharing news articles about the impacts of medical and biological research on the communities where your tenth graders live.

While a teacher should be careful to avoid a superficial “heroes and holidays” approach to multicultural education, there is considerable benefit to a well-developed strategy for consistently highlighting the contributions of individuals with whom students identify. Consider, for example, the following discussion of the benefits and means of highlighting African-American contributors for African-American students:

Chronicling the accomplishments of African-Americans in the classroom provides encouragement and motivation for students (Diller 1999; Chandler 1995). Scientists such as the laser physicists and astronaut Ronald McNair, the chemist Percy Lavon Julian, and the physician and astronaut Mae Jemison demonstrate to students that Blacks can excel in science, have done so in the past, and are doing so in the present. There are examples of Black doctors including Charles Drew, who discovered the importance of the use of blood plasma in transfusions, Daniel Hale Williams, who performed the first successful

¹²⁰ Hylton, V.W. and Dummet, L. *Multiethnic/multicultural materials*. Richmond, VA: Virginia State Department of Education, Division of Technical Assistance for Equity in Education, 1986. (ED 272 440)

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heart operation; and David Satcher, a genetics researcher who [served] as the Surgeon General for the United States. The lives of these phenomenal African-Americans can empower Black youth by demonstrating that they too have the option to choose a career in medicine. Inventors such as Lewis Latimer, who designed the carbon filament for light bulbs, and Jan Matzeliger, who designed a shoe-lacing machine, have added to the quality of U.S. life, but few students know this. These role models are important to all students, especially to those who live in economically depressed neighborhoods where academics compete with hopelessness, gang activity, and overemphasis on athletic and entertainment careers.¹²¹

Of course, any time a teacher is considering adding materials and methods to the curriculum, a tension arises regarding how to best synthesize the traditional “canon” of materials (whatever that may include) and the more diverse collection of materials, texts, and perspectives. At a fundamental level, a teacher must find a balance between the urge to build on and validate the students’ background and culture, and preparing students to live in a world where their background and culture may not be the dominant one. As multicultural education scholar Marilyn Cochran-Smith explains, “children need to know something about the ‘canon’ of history and literature and how and when to utilize the conventions of standard English, but they also need to see their own experiences reflected in novels and history books...How to do both...is, I would venture, a life-long theme for many teachers and teacher educators.”¹²²

METHOD #2: Recognize and appreciate diverse backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives (including those not represented by the individuals in your classroom). The most effective classrooms not only highlight those backgrounds and cultures that are represented in the classroom, but also—to some degree—recognize and appreciate other backgrounds and cultures that may be new and unfamiliar to the students. Many cultures and backgrounds are brought to students from outside the classroom to students through strategic choices of books, materials, and lessons. The process of exploring and engaging different backgrounds and cultures is in and of itself a valued learning experience that can offer many synergies to accelerate students’ learning.¹²³

The best way to understand your students’ backgrounds and cultures is to take as many opportunities as possible to interact with the community, and to approach those opportunities with humility, respect, and an eagerness to learn. Get to know the people in and around your school: janitors, secretaries, crossing guards, local librarians, park administrators, clerics, businesspeople. Form relationships. Ask them questions about the neighborhood, its history, their experiences. Understanding the way your kids understand their community will allow you to make more effective connections between academic concepts and students’ lives outside of school.

Andrew Clark, Chicago ‘02
Associate Regional Planner, Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

¹²¹ Teixeira, Mary Thierry, and Pamela Merchant Christian. “And Still They Rise: Practice Advice for Increasing African American Enrollments in Higher Education.” *Educational HORIZONS*, Spring 2002, p. 122.

¹²² Cochran-Smith, Marilyn. “Uncertain Allies: Understanding the Boundaries of Race and Teaching.” *Harvard Education Review*, Vol., 65, No. 4., Winter 1995, p. 13.

¹²³ For great ideas regarding a number of multicultural lesson plans for all grades and subject areas, visit www.RethinkingSchools.org.

METHOD #3: Consider and benefit from the potential insights of research on the “cultural learning style” of your students. In chapter seven of this text, we explored the debate over, and some of the findings of, research that suggests that students of a given culture learn differently than do students of another culture. We will not rehash those ideas and debates here, but as you recall, there were a number of purported insights about the learning styles of African-American, Latino, and Native American students. Whether or not you find those generalizations about how these various groups best learn useful, you should familiarize yourself with both the research findings and the cultural backgrounds of your students. At the very least, that information will likely serve as meaningful background for your individual interactions with your African American, Latino, and Native American students.

METHOD #4: Teach and model norms of positive, inclusive interactions among members of the class. In chapter five of the *Classroom Management & Culture* text, a number of ways of creating a positive, inclusive atmosphere are presented. Without restating those methods here, we would like to highlight some of the key strategies that corps members have found to be successful in their attempt to create a classroom community that values diverse cultures and perspectives.

As you read in that chapter, the four main goals you must accomplish as a teacher in order to form a culture of community are establishing a respectful tone, establishing a bond with and among your students, creating a community that values all students, and helping students resolve conflicts. A few strategies that corps members have relied on as “best practices” in working towards these goals are revisited briefly here as a review:

Establishing a Respectful Tone

- Model this behavior by maintaining a tone of respect with your students, regardless of what you might see them doing.
- Speak in your own natural voice at all times - do not yell or use a condescending tone.
- Err on the side of being “overly” sensitive to your students’ feelings. Beware of using sarcasm, even in a joking manner.

I discovered that one of the most important ways I could create a community in which diversity was valued was to respond every time diversity wasn't being valued. At the beginning of each school year, I sometimes heard my students say things that were racist or heterosexist. I knew that if I didn't respond to these comments, I would be teaching my students that it was okay to say these things. The comments quickly subsided. At first, I think this was because students thought that the comments upset me. (Students would say things like, "Don't say that; it makes Ms. Crement angry.") As the year went on, the comments stopped because my students began to value diversity and to see that if they were going to feel safe, valued, and respected in our classroom, they needed to take responsibility to create a culture that promoted this.

**Stephanie Crement, Bay Area '99
Special Education English/Language Arts Teacher,
Boston Public Schools**

Establishing a Bond With and Among Your Students

- Attend or lead student activities to demonstrate an interest in their lives while gaining greater knowledge of your students’ strengths, personalities, and abilities.
- Use a suggestion box or other way to collect student feedback in your classroom; this will help make your students feel respected and valued.
- Utilize “getting-to-know-you” and team-building activities to facilitate your students working together and learning with and about each other.
- Set aside time for daily or weekly meetings to create a safe, respectful place for communication.

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Creating a Community that Values All Students

- Deconstruct your personal biases (see the chapter in this text on Unpacking Privilege).
- Ensure you are involving all students by looking for patterns of preference in your classroom.
- Capitalize on any opportunity to incorporate messages of tolerance into the curriculum.
- Respond to insensitive comments - do not allow them to go unnoticed, and recognize the "teachable" moments that they create.

Helping Students Resolve Conflict

- Teach students how to use "I" statements to explain their actions and feelings to each other. Possibly have them record their thoughts in writing before a discussion about a conflict.
- Teach and model "active listening" strategies for your students so that they all feel they are being heard and understood.

METHOD #5: Evaluate materials for their inclusiveness and cultural relevance. The fifth method for infusing principles of multicultural education into your classroom involves assessing all of the materials you use in your classroom to ensure that they do not somehow undermine messages of inclusiveness. A number of multicultural scholars have proposed lists for identifying forms of subtle and blatant bias that teachers should look for in textbooks and other materials. Consider for example, the following guidelines for assessing the inclusiveness of education materials, proposed by the Intercultural Development Research Association:¹²⁴

- **Invisibility.** Certain groups may be underrepresented in curricular materials. The significant omission of women and minority groups has become so great as to imply that these groups are of less value, importance and significance in our society.
- **Stereotyping.** By assigning traditional and rigid roles or attributes to a group, instructional materials may stereotype and limit the abilities and potential of that group. Children who see themselves portrayed only in stereotypical ways may internalize those stereotypes and fail to develop their own unique abilities, interests, and full potential.
- **Imbalance and Selectivity.** Textbooks can perpetuate bias by presenting only one interpretation of an issue, situation or group of people. This imbalanced account restricts the knowledge of students regarding the varied perspectives that may apply to a particular situation. Through selective presentation of materials, textbooks may distort reality and ignore complex and differing viewpoints. As a result, millions of students have been given limited perspectives concerning the contributions, struggles and participation of certain groups in society.
- **Unreality.** Textbooks sometimes present an unrealistic portrayal of our history and our contemporary life experience. Controversial topics may be glossed over, and discussions of discrimination and prejudice may be avoided. This unrealistic coverage denies children the information they need to recognize, understand and perhaps someday conquer the problems that plague our society.
- **Fragmentation and Isolation.** By separating issues related to minorities and women from the main body of the text, instructional materials imply that these issues are less important than and not a part of the cultural mainstream.
- **Linguistic Bias.** Curricular materials can sometimes reflect the discriminatory nature of our language. Older texts about Native Americans might use terms like "savage" or "simple" to describe their lifestyle, for example. Common masculine terms, including the generic "he," also arguably deny the participation of women in our society. Imbalance of word order and lack of parallel terms that refer to women and men are also forms of linguistic bias.

¹²⁴ Adapted from Love, Reeve Ph.D. and Alicia Salinas Sosa, Ph.D. *Stereotyping and Bias: Their Origin and Effects*. San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association.

The Problem with “Taco Tuesday”—What Multicultural Education Is NOT.

As is clear from these five methods of infusing the principles of multicultural education into your classroom, multicultural education *is*—but is also much *more* than—reference to or celebration of persons of color, or other cultures. As the student of one education professor put it, “a multicultural class is more than ‘Taco Tuesday.’”¹²⁵ While being a multicultural educator *does* mean celebrating heroes and holidays, it also means taking an approach to your classroom that integrates many cultures throughout your curriculum, values diversity, and teaches the values of tolerance and understanding every day.

The practice of incorporating references to minority cultural groups that are superficial and transitory, as opposed to thinking about the opportunities to celebrate diversity throughout your curriculum and long-term plans, is unfortunately common. This practice takes on several, recognizable forms:

Typical inappropriate treatment of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans includes the “side-bar” approach, the “superhero” syndrome, and the “one size fits all” view. Side-bar treatment occurs frequently in textbooks, where presentation of ethnic experiences is limited to a few isolated events--frequently relegated to a box or side-bar, set apart from the rest of the text. Another common misrepresentation of certain ethnic groups occurs when only exceptional individuals, the “superheroes” of history from among that race or cultural group, are acknowledged.¹²⁶

As another multicultural scholar explains,

In order to establish respect for other cultures in the classroom, teachers must move beyond “multicultural moments” or pseudomulticulturalism (Miller 88). Celebrating Black History Month is a great example of a multicultural moment that many teachers incorporate into their curriculum once a year. Not only do Black History units presented exclusively in February hinder the ability for teachers to cover a wide range of cultures at the same time, creating this type of curriculum sends a message that Black History is separate from and inferior to European History.¹²⁷

For more resources on multicultural education and how to effectively incorporate your students’ culture in your curriculum for the benefit of their academic achievement, please see the

Embracing multicultural education must go beyond celebrating heroes and holidays. In general, it means studying our selves and our society in ways that lay bare how we define differences and assign or strip power according to those differences. In particular (at least in my 8th grade English class), it means reading and writing dialogue poems contrasting the perspectives of people in differing power strata; it means examining an author’s choice in language and explicitly teaching the importance of code switching; it means affording students the choice to write research papers about topics that engage their critical lenses—like driver’s license policies for undocumented immigrants, gender double standards in family practices, or implications of music lyrics. Above all, multicultural education (in fact any good education) is one that takes the student from being a passive consumer of information, to being a thoughtful critic, to being a critical producer of knowledge.

**Frank Lozier, Los Angeles ‘00
Vice Principal, Compton Unified School District**

¹²⁵ Teixeira, Mary Thierry, and Pamela Merchant Christian. “And Still They Rise: Practice Advice for Increasing African American Enrollments in Higher Education.” *Educational HORIZONS*, Spring 2002, p. 119.

¹²⁶ Abdal-Haqq, Ismat. “Culturally Responsive Curriculum.” Washington, DC: ERIC Digest, June 1996. (ED 370 936)

¹²⁷ Fish, Larri. “Building Blocks: The First Steps of Creating a Multicultural Classroom.” EdChange Research Room, Multicultural Pavilion. Available at www.edchange.org/multicultural/papers/buildingblocks.html, accessed 7/1/2010.

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Diversity, Community, & Achievement Toolkit (p. 8: “Multicultural Education Tools on the Internet”); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖

IV. Conclusion

We began this chapter with the obvious point that “multicultural education” means different things to different people. As we have explored those different meanings, however, we hope you have come to recognize some common themes in multicultural education that you can use in your classroom. Through these methods, you will be able to develop ethnic and cultural literacy in your students, nurture the personal esteem and development of your students (who may not often see themselves in the materials they are studying), teach important values of inclusiveness and tolerance, and prepare students for interacting and working with people who are different than themselves. Of course, above all, taking a multicultural education approach to your classroom means more effectively teaching your students.

At this time, please stop in your reading and turn to the final additional article that goes with this text, “Profoundly Multicultural Questions” by Sonia Nieto. This selection can be accessed by visiting the Pre-Institute Work page on the Institute Info Center within TFANet. 📖