

Diversity as a Path to Achievement

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I. What It Takes for Diversity to Be a Path to Achievement

As new teachers, the range of the diversity-related issues we encounter is vast. We might, for example, implement lesson plans that recognize and appreciate diverse cultural backgrounds, or that respectfully incorporate the experiences of our students and their families. On the same day, we may need to react quickly to a student's religion-based insult of another student in our classroom. During the same week, we may create personal connections with a key veteran teacher that will help win over a few other veteran teachers on campus who were suspicious of us because of our inexperience, or age, or race, or gender, or religion, or sexual orientation. Or, by reflecting on our own behaviors, we might come to realize that we harbor subtle but deep-seated biases against some of our students because of some element of their identity.

On one hand, your central purpose as a teacher is to lead your students to academic achievement. You will—by setting ambitious goals, investing your students in them, working relentlessly, and constantly improving your approach—strive to close the achievement gap for and change the life prospects of your students. Clearly, if you achieve this purpose, little else matters. Student progress is what your students, their families, your administrators, and you want to see.

On the other hand, it would be naive and misguided to think that this focus on academic achievement means diversity issues do not matter. On the contrary, handling well the plethora of diversity issues that you will encounter is a prerequisite to enabling and inspiring your students to meet their academic goals.

You are beginning a new role. (Even those of us who teach in the community where we have previously lived find that being in the role of a teacher in that community brings new dynamics around issues of diversity.) To invest colleagues, students, and families in your goals requires that you connect with them emotionally. The reality is that diversity-related dynamics are on people's minds. Your students may be wondering about—and perhaps making assumptions about—how your identity as an older White man from California, or a younger Latino woman from Texas, will impact your classroom management. Whatever your racial identity and educational experiences, you may be wrestling with your own stubborn assumptions about the African-American boys, the Latina girls, or the students receiving special education services who are in your classroom. The same veteran teachers who will become such wonderful resources and mentors for you probably have their own questions about your background and its impact on your ability to lead your students to academic excellence. The reality of our role is that diversity-related issues are impacting you and those around you.

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What We Mean By “Diversity”

Given that we can find virtually every kind of diversity in the classrooms and communities where we work, Teach For America considers “diversity” broadly, to include the full range of differences in identities and backgrounds including, but not limited to, those related to race and ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender, age, religion, political opinion, language, and ability.

This text should be viewed as a set of ideas and methods that will make you more effective. By proactively engaging in the questions and conversations that make up this set of ideas, teachers discover a whole range of methods and approaches that empower them to more effectively connect with, instruct, and lead students to ambitious academic goals.

So, what does it take for a teacher to engage in diversity issues proactively—to ensure that issues related to diversity are approached in a way that has the potential to improve, rather than obstruct, the classroom experience for students? Three key ideas, we believe, are at the heart of new teachers’ attempts

to approach diversity issues in a way that serves as a positive force for academic achievement:

(1) Maintaining High Expectations. As teachers in low-income communities, we are often bombarded with unrelenting pressure (at times from society, from the community, from the school, from family members, and even from the students themselves) to lower the academic standards that we demand of our students. We must educate ourselves about the challenges inherent in maintaining high expectations so that we can more effectively overcome those challenges.

(2) Building a Strong Knowledge Base. As an instructional leader, a key to taking full advantage of the rich opportunities afforded by the diversity found in your classroom is to build your knowledge and awareness of:

- a. Your *own* personal experience and background, including your identity-related biases and privileges
- b. Your students’ identity, including, in part, their culture, background, gender, race, ethnicity, and cognitive and emotional development
- c. Methods and theories of multicultural education in the classroom

The Danger of “Lumping” Identities

As you know, all of us carry many identities. And no single identity characteristic can be assumed to carry others. White, for example, does not necessarily mean affluent. We have many White corps members who grew up in low-income settings and whose backgrounds may be very different from those who grew up with greater means. (We do, at times, talk about “White privilege” in this text, but that is a concept that, in our society, transcends socioeconomic status.)

Similarly, we realize that in discussing group labels such as people of color, African-American, Latino, or Native American we are referring to people with a wide range of experiences. We often in this text, for example, talk about the achievement gap in terms of its impact on students segregated by their race and socioeconomic status. In most but not all cases, the achievement gap impacts students at the intersection of those two identity characteristics.

These are obvious points, but it is helpful going into these conversations to check our assumptions and remember that there are probably as many differences within any given “group” as there are among them.

(3) Working to Effect Significant Gains with Respect and Humility. Your commitment to propel your students to achieve ambitious academic goals is an effort to make change. As new members of our school and community, we must approach any attempts to make change with great respect and humility. This is even more critical if you seek to change policies or practices at your school that you believe to be inhibiting your students’ academic achievement.

These three ideas represent the common approaches of teachers who embrace diversity matters in the classroom and who take full advantage of diversity issues as a means of reaching for academic success. This text has been designed to introduce you to these fundamental ideas.

II. How This Text Is Organized

The three guiding objectives of this text are (a) maintain high expectations, (b) build the necessary diversity-related knowledge base, and (c) enter your community with respect and humility. The text is organized as follows:

Part I: Maintaining High Expectations

Chapter One—Race, Class and the Achievement Gap: The Promise of Student Potential

This chapter lays the foundation for further discussion by stepping back to consider some of the reasons for the high correlation among race, class, and the achievement gap. While there is a correlation between low achievement and students' race and class, it is not a difference in students' potential that causes that correlation but is instead, in part, a difference in our expectations of those students.

Additional Reading (on TFANet):

- "Explaining the Academic Gap; Conventional and Alternative Explanations"—an excerpt of a chapter from John Ogbu's *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*¹

Chapter Two—The Power of High Expectations: Closing the Gap in Your Classroom

This second chapter has direct connections to the *Teaching As Leadership* book. Here we explore the amazingly promising power of high expectations—and the frighteningly damaging power of low expectations. Not only are low expectations a key cause of the achievement gap, but high expectations are also one of the primary solutions to the achievement gap that is truly within a teacher's control. As a result, this chapter focuses on those high expectations and what they may look like in your classroom.

Is This Text Just for White People?

No. All new teachers are at different points in the process of understanding the complex issues that our students and schools in low-income communities face. Whether your personal background is notably different from the students you teach, or whether it mirrors their experience in various ways, it is necessary to reflect on the impact that these likenesses and differences will have on your classroom experience before encountering the inevitable challenges that lie ahead.

However your identity compares to the identify of your students, you may find it valuable to undergo a deep process of reflection to ensure that you are always operating with respect and empathy without compromising high expectations. Furthermore, whatever your identity, the process you went through in your own identity development might be helpful as you interact with your students who are likely shaping their own self-concept as well.

We believe that all corps members will benefit from asking themselves the questions posed by this text—particularly as you embrace these questions as a new educator and as an agent for change within your school community. Have you contemplated how you will address issues of race or racism in the classroom? Have you considered the ways in which dynamics of gender or class can mirror many of the stigmas and challenges that we discuss in this text regarding race? And as you make assumptions about what you and your students share, have you thought about the ways in which you are different-or the ways in which you might inappropriately assume that your experiences are similar to those of your students? Similarly, as you make assumptions about how you and your students differ, have you thought about all that you share and the ways in which you might inappropriately assume that your experiences are foreign to your students?

Variations within a particular group are often stark. Different groups often have much in common. For corps members of all races, there is plenty of room to be a student of diversity before assuming the mantle of the teacher.

¹ Ogbu, John. *Black American Students In An Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*. Manwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc., 2003. Chapter 3: "Explaining the Academic Gap; Conventional and Alternative Explanations," pp. 33-44.

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Additional Readings (on TFANet):

- “Racism, Discrimination, and Expectations of Students’ Achievement,” from Sonia Nieto & Patty Bode’s *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*²
- “Equity Within Reach: Insights from the Front Lines of America’s Achievement Gap,” results of a survey of Teach For America corps members

Chapter Three—The Challenge of Maintaining High Expectations

In Chapter Three we explore the difficulties inherent in maintaining high expectations. First and foremost, many teachers find that the bleak reality of students’ low academic skills shakes their faith in high expectations. Other teachers inadvertently contribute to lowering expectations by making excuses for students out of sympathy or concern for them. This chapter will provide suggestions for avoiding those pitfalls.

Additional Reading (in Related Readings section):

- “Identity Development in Adolescence,” a chapter from Beverly Daniel Tatum’s book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*

Part II: Building a Strong Diversity-Related Knowledge Base

Chapter Four—Dynamics of Difference and Sameness: Teachers’ Reflections on Diversity in Their Classrooms

This chapter also seeks to lay a foundation for further discussion but narrows our focus from the broad social dynamics that create the achievement gap to the daily dynamics of difference and sameness that are a part of any classroom. In this chapter, we will share in the personal reflections of a number of teachers who have experienced these dynamics first-hand.

Additional Reading (on 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*³

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

Chapter Five begins the process of building the “knowledge bases” that teachers need to use diversity to their advantage as instructional leaders. A key element of that knowledge base, of course, is knowledge of self. This chapter asks each of us—no matter what our own race, ethnicity, background, gender, sexual orientation, or disability—to look within ourselves to consider the conscious and subconscious biases that we are bringing to the table. Here we make and discuss the distinction between those biases and the often invisible benefits of unearned power and privilege that some of us may be afforded because of our identities.

Additional Readings (on TFANet):

- Teaching Tolerance’s hidden bias tests at http://www.tolerance.org/hidden_bias/index.html
- “Unpacking Straight Privilege” by Earlham College Students

² Nieto, Sonia & Bode, Patty. *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers USA, 2008. Chapter 4: “Racism, Discrimination, and Expectations of Students’ Achievement,” pp. 65-91.

³ Delpit, Lisa. *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: The New Press, 1995. “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children,” pp. 21-47.

Chapter Six—How Racial Identity Affects Performance

Chapter Six explores how students' racial identity (and the ways in which adults can help or hinder its development) affect academic performance. This chapter considers the common patterns of racial identity development for people of color and for White people; these frameworks serve as a way to make sense of both teachers' and students' evolution of understanding around conversations and incidents related to diversity. This area of research offers particular insights into the ways that students may be grappling with their own identity as a member of their ethnic or racial group.

Additional Readings:

- **(on TFANet)** "How Racial Identity Affects School Performance" by Pedro Noguera⁴
- **(in Related Readings section)** "The Early Years," a chapter from Beverly Daniel Tatum's book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*
- **(in Related Readings section)** "Critical Issues in Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American Identity Development," an excerpt from another chapter in the same book⁵

Chapter Seven—"Cultural Learning Styles": Should Students' Culture Inform Instructional Choices?

This chapter explores whether one can and should adjust one's teaching style according to the race or ethnicity of the students in the classroom. Are there generalizations about the "cultural learning style" of African-Americans, or Latino students and families, or Native American students that should inform decisions that you make in the classroom?

Additional Readings (on TFANet):

- *Speaking, relating and learning: A study of Hawaiian children at home and at school*—a study by Steven Boggs, Karen Watson-Gegeo, and G. McMillen⁶
- "An Indian Father's Plea"—a letter from Robert Lake to his son's teacher⁷
- "American Indian/Alaskan Native Learning Styles: Research and Practice" by Karen Swisher⁸
- "Culture, Identity, and Learning," by Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode from their book *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*⁹

Chapter Eight—Multicultural Education

This chapter continues our quest to build our diversity-related knowledge base by exploring the definitions and intentions of multicultural education. Here we also consider the importance of recognizing multicultural education as a means to the end of effective teaching. This chapter culminates with a discussion of five strategies for implementing the principles of multicultural education in your classroom.

Additional Reading (on TFANet):

- "Profoundly Multicultural Questions" by Sonia Nieto¹⁰

⁴ Noguera, Pedro. "How Racial Identity Affects School Performance." 2003. *Harvard Educational Letter*. <http://www.hepg.org>.

⁵ Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. Chapter 8: "Critical Issues in Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American Identity Development," pp. 131-153.

⁶ Boggs, Steven, Karen Watson-Gegeo, and G. McMillen. *Speaking, relating and learning: A study of Hawaiian children at home and at school*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986. Abstract.

⁷ Lake, Robert. "An Indian Father's Plea." *Teacher Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1990.

⁸ Swisher, Karen. "American Indian/Alaskan Native Learning Styles: Research and Practice." ERIC Digest, May 1991. [ED 335 175]

⁹ Nieto, Sonia, & Bode, Patty. *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers USA, 2008. Chapter 6: "Culture, Identity, and Learning," pp. 169-192.

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

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Part III: Effecting Change with Respect and Humility

Chapter Nine—Effecting Change with Respect and Humility: It Starts with Success in Your Classroom

As a teacher striving for your children to achieve ambitious academic goals, you are an agent of change. Further, in pursuit of significant gains, you may feel the need to try to influence policies and practices in your school. If and when such issues truly affect your students' learning, you may choose to engage in those issues to maximize the chances that your students can meet their academic goals. Of course, *how* you choose to approach policies and practices you feel need to be changed can be just as important as which issues you choose to address. This chapter provides some guidance for achieving your ambitious goals within the culture of your school and community.

As you can see, each chapter of this text consists of a brief introductory survey of the chapter's key ideas and then some additional articles or essays on those ideas by various academics, teachers, and commentators. These articles are not "supplemental," but are instead meant to be central components of the reading with each chapter. In some cases, these articles carry important content for a chapter.

Also, note that through these articles, we have attempted to incorporate a variety of voices and perspectives into these conversations. None of those single voices represents the "opinion of Teach For America," whatever that might mean. Just as we may not all agree on using a particular teaching method in a particular situation, members of our organization will have different perspectives on some of these provocative issues. Please read these articles and excerpts not as representative of this organization's thinking, but as catalysts for your own.

If you are interested in pursuing further research into these topics to provoke your thinking, see the **Diversity, Community, & Achievement Toolkit** (p. 1) for the list of selected diversity-related resources; this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖

How the Texts Are Organized

Teach For America has long wrestled with the most effective and appropriate way to discuss diversity. On the one hand, having a separate "diversity" text risks incorrectly suggesting that diversity issues can be distilled away from the instructional and management contexts in which they actually play out in the classroom. On the other hand, simply weaving diversity issues into the other texts does not lend these matters the independent weight that they deserve.

You will therefore find that key diversity issues are addressed in both this *Diversity, Community, & Achievement* text and in the other texts as well. In considering *Instructional Planning & Delivery*, for example, you will read what factors to consider when choosing from among instructional methods and strategies. That exploration includes consideration of diversity-related factors and what role they should play in your decisions. In *Classroom Management & Culture*, for example, you read about concrete techniques for creating an inclusive classroom—one in which diversity is valued by you and your students. Those of you who received the *Elementary Literacy* text read about teachers' decisions about how to approach differences in dialect in their classrooms. In *Teaching As Leadership*, you read about the particular challenges associated with investing low-income families in students' ambitious goals for academic achievement.

Among the key questions to consider based on your reading of this text are:

- *How does my background affect my teaching and my students' learning? How am I perceived in my new community?*
- *What assumptions and prejudices do we each hold about my students, their families, our schools, and our communities? And how does exploring them make us better teachers?*
- *To what extent, if at all, should race, class, or gender be a factor in a teacher's instructional or managerial choices?*
- *How do I most effectively approach and involve my students' family in our class's academic goals?*
- *How do I create a classroom where all students are welcomed?*
- *What is a multicultural education and how does it help me reach my students' goals?*
- *Why is fighting low expectations so difficult?*
- *How do I respectfully become a part of my school and community without sacrificing any opportunities for academic achievement for my students?*

III. Our Goals: Why We Address Issues of Diversity

Our number one goal in this text—as in all the others—is **to prepare you to lead your students to dramatic academic gains**. We address issues of diversity because we believe corps members who have encountered and considered these questions make more successful teachers, better serving their students and more likely leading them to dramatic academic gains. From a practical perspective, no matter what your background and experience with these issues, you will benefit from (and in some cases struggle with) the three core themes of this text: (a) maintaining high expectations, (b) building a diversity-related knowledge base, and (c) working for change with respect and humility.

More broadly, we believe that to be a truly effective movement to expand educational opportunity, our corps members, alumni, staff, and board members must value and operate with sensitivity to the tremendous diversity found in the communities we serve. To that end, we view the reading of this text as one step in a lifetime of consideration of these issues, and we ask that all corps members—no matter what their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic background, or culture—engage in these issues, as we expect that all of you will find that at least some of the ideas explored in this text are new to you.

I was the second white teacher to ever work at my school. It was an issue, whether I wanted it to be or not. Instead of ignoring it, I talked to the students about it. When they asked questions I answered, and never ignored it. No one is color blind. There is no one answer to dealing with being the "minority" as the teacher, but the worst thing to do is pretend it doesn't matter. It does.

Cate Reed, DC '00
Project Manager (via Broad Residency)
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We also realize from experience that this process can be difficult. Sometimes the process of examining one's own and others' belief systems is emotional and stressful. As one researcher who has spent her career discussing these issues with new teachers explained:

Many prospective teachers and teacher educators find this discourse powerful but unsettling, in part because it is often difficult to reconcile new understandings with their own prior experiences and assumptions about the meritocracy of the U.S. educational system, and in part because they realize that no obvious solutions exist. Indeed, when we 'unleash unpopular things' by making race and racism explicit parts of the curriculum,

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responses are often strongly emotional, and resistance, misunderstanding, frustration, anger, and feelings of inefficacy may be the outcomes.¹¹

These responses occur because what we are attempting in this text is extremely difficult. The issues are complex and at times deeply personal. As another multicultural education researcher states, “‘Getting there’—the place within oneself where you acknowledge and accept your race/ethnicity, identity, gender, class, spirituality, and sexual orientation and the power relations within our nation’s sociohistoric past that maintain the status quo, and learn to value and respect others whose race/ethnicity identity, gender, class, spirituality, and sexual orientation differ from your own and the sociohistoric past that maintains or constrains power—is often a bumpy road.”¹²

In diversity discussions at Teach For America in the past, members of our group have in relatively rare instances made comments that are insensitive to and hurt others in the group. While we believe strongly that all of us can and do evolve in our beliefs, as an organization we think it is appropriate to challenge and examine insensitive comments as soon as possible. We hope that our norms of interaction (which are provided at the Institute and available from your regional program director) help guide us in those difficult moments.

At the same time, we want to create within Teach For America an environment in which we do share, discuss, and debate our beliefs on these matters, and it is absolutely essential that all of us approach those opportunities with a generosity of spirit, recognizing and appreciating the diverse perspectives that we bring to the conversation.

We also want to ensure that in the course of these conversations at Teach For America, no particular member of any group is expected to “represent” that group’s perspective. Corps members of color are not be expected to teach other corps members about diversity. White corps members will not be assumed to have any less experience with these issues than other corps members. We hope that each of you bring your own personal and unique experience (as female, or White, or lesbian, or Asian-American, or Christian, etc.) to the table as we discuss ways to harness the opportunities afforded by diversity in your classroom.

Finally, a brief note on the limitations of any “diversity training” text—the materials you will read and the ideas you will discuss as a member of the Teach For America community will likely amount to a small fraction of the learning and growing you will experience in your interaction with your students in your classroom. This intuitive truth—verified anecdotally by thousands of corps members—is also suggested by research: “Research during the last decade has demonstrated that the formal aspects of pre-service teacher preparation do little to alter students’ outlooks and practices, while the less formal, experiential aspects of student teaching—fieldwork experiences and especially exposure to the cultures of schools and teaching—are potentially significant influences.”¹³

Our aim in this endeavor is to produce highly effective teachers, and it is as a means to this end that we believe diversity-related discussions are a critical part of a new teacher’s development. Thus, in the context of helping our corps members assure that they are armed to overcome the lowered expectations that have dogged their students, we will ask you to think about a number of difficult issues related to the dynamics of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability that play out in your classroom—sometimes among students and sometimes within yourself.

¹¹ Cochran-Smith, Marilyn. “Uncertain Allies: Understanding the Boundaries of Race and Teaching.” *Harvard Education Review*, Vol. 65, No. 4, Winter 1995, p. 2.

¹² Willis, Arlette Ingram. “Keeping It Real: Teaching and Learning About Culture, Literacy, and Respect.” *English Education*, Vol. 32, No. 4, July 2000, p. 267.

¹³ Cochran-Smith, Marilyn. “Uncertain Allies: Understanding the Boundaries of Race and Teaching.” *Harvard Education Review*, Vol. 65, No. 4, Winter 1995, p. 17.

IV. A Note on Our Core Beliefs (and Questions) About Diversity

Over the course of the last twenty years, we have developed some core beliefs that serve as a foundation for our approach to training and supporting new teachers.

- We believe that the achievement gap in America—and its strong correlation with students’ race and class—is a disgraceful blight on our society and undermines the most fundamental ideals of equity on which our country was founded.
- We believe that the fact that 95% of the children in the under-resourced schools where we teach are African-American or Latino is a stark indicator that race and class must be central components of our conversation about ending the achievement gap.
- We believe that the academic out-performance of poorer, minority students by wealthier, usually White students does **not** indicate that minority students have any less potential than students in other communities. In fact, based on our experience, we are confident that it is a widespread **perception** of a lack of potential (because of our students’ race, class, or gender) that, in part, leads to the achievement gap in the first place. Having seen the power of high expectations to break those “self-fulfilling prophecies” of failure in thousands of classrooms, we consider one of our primary tasks in training and supporting corps members to be providing them with the tools and resolve they need to maintain high expectations for their students in the face of an unyielding tide of low expectations, and then in the long-run to take on other fundamental structural issues causing the achievement gap in the first place.
- The myth of low expectations is perpetuated by external factors (such as subtle and not-so-subtle societal images and messages) or by explicit statements from even well-intended adults in our students’ lives (such as teachers who “pity” a child from a low-income household and therefore do not expect as much of her). As honest and self-critical teachers, we also recognize that we may perpetuate such damaging messages in the form of both conscious and subconscious biases and prejudices that all of us have internalized as members of a society that perpetuates low expectations of the children in our schools. We believe that all of us—no matter what our race, class, gender, background, orientation, disability, political view, age, or experience—must actively *work* to overcome both those external and internal perpetuators of low expectations for our students.
- While we believe that we must not lower our expectations of our students because of their race, class, gender, or background, we also have found that figurative “color-blindness” in the classroom (represented by the well-intentioned comment “I don’t see color, I see children”) is at best, misguided and at worst, dangerous. We believe that effective teachers are in fact aware of their students’ unique backgrounds and perspectives and capitalize on

Since I grew up in an environment where little was expected of me, I was familiar with the label of “not able to achieve.” I am living proof that this notion that is often ingrained in students’ minds, of being unable to learn, is simply untrue. For so many of our students, it has become a norm to lack self-confidence. It is our job as educators to bring to the surface the talents and skills that truly lie within.

Susan Asiyambi, New Jersey ‘01
Senior Vice President, Teacher Preparation,
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opportunities to acknowledge and celebrate those differences in the natural course of their march toward ambitious goals for academic achievement.

I worried that I wouldn't fit in at my school, that my students wouldn't like me, and that I'd be a huge failure. Needless to say, these worries were pretty transparent, and both my students and staff sensed my lack of belonging. I figured that the more I could become part of this new community, the more I would be accepted, and the more gains I would make both personally and professionally. By going to all of the football games, attending church with my students (even though I'm Jewish), and eating and shopping in my kids' neighborhoods, I quickly became a recognizable fixture. This not only helped me feel more welcome in New Orleans, but it helped me relate more to my students and in turn improved their behavior in class.

Cheryl Bratt, New Orleans '01
Judicial Law Clerk
Eastern District of Pennsylvania

We know that the reading of this text and discussions you engage in with Teach For America colleagues and others all too often does not provide enough time to process, reflect on, and “prepare for” all of the difficult diversity-related issues that teachers face, especially for those of us who have done relatively little previously to examine our own background and biases. While we recognize that most corps members do join Teach For America having already begun the process of (a) examining critically their own assumptions about their new students and communities, and (b) thinking carefully about how they themselves are perceived given their own unique identities, we believe that learning to recognize, manage, and celebrate the dynamics of difference and sameness in your classroom takes time and is a part of your ongoing commitment to your students.

This text is built upon these fundamental tenets and values. While we welcome discussions of and challenges to these founding principles, the rigorous debates to which they have been subjected and from which they have evolved over the last seventeen years give us great confidence in their guidance.