Teachers' Discoveries of Their Cultural Realms: Untangling the Web of Cultural Identity

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Educators need to explore and understand their own cultural identities before they can comprehend and appreciate their students cultural backgrounds. In this article, the author presents the findings from a qualitative study that investigated in-service teachers' awareness of and characterization of their culture. She also discusses the importance of affording educators opportunities to reflect on and make the connection between culture and their worldview. The author concludes by recommending useful and practical next steps once teachers have a better understanding of their cultural identities.*

This researcher's interest in educators' definitions of their cultural identity was inspired by her experiences as a resident assistant in family housing at a state university in the southwest of the United States. As she planned to organize the first of what then became an annual multicultural festival for the campus, she approached a number of residents to garner their support for the event. She received such intriguing responses as "I am from Texas, I don't have a culture";."I've seen enough foreigners "I'm just a plain American." She learned then that the first step in initiating a multicultural dialogue must begin with an individual's exploration and understanding of his or her own cultural identity.

Anthropologists and sociologists have defined the concept of culture in a variety of ways that have not drawn any consensus (Bennett, 2003; Erickson, 2001). In this article, the term *culture* refers to the acquired complex knowledge that individuals and communities use to affirm and interpret the values, beliefs, customs, and practices that distinguish them from other people and groups in society.

According to Banks (2001), several variables contribute to the definition of an individual's cultural identity. They are nationality, race and ethnicity, religion, exceptionality/nonexceptionality, social class, and gen-

der. Banks explains that "an individual belongs to several different groups at the same time" and that "the more we know about a student's level of identification with a particular group and the extent to which socialization has taken place within that group, the more accurately we can predict, explain, and understand the student's behavior" (p. 14). Quite often, classroom conflicts between teachers and students or among students themselves arise from cultural misunderstandings that could be resolved through communication, allowing for better understanding of self and others.

Hence, as a multicultural teacher-educator, the researcher designed her courses with one main goal in mind: to help bridge the cultural gap that confines educators and students into separate worlds and to set the stage for open-minded and positive cross-cultural communication, which is a prime prerequisite for effective relationships between educators and students from culturally different backgrounds. To achieve this goal, the

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researcher engaged her students in an active process of individual cultural identity clarification and cross-cultural exploration. The rationale for this process was that teachers must come to terms with their own cultural identities as well as those of the students they teach (Hones, 1999; M. *L*. Marshall, 2002) to develop the necessary dispositions and skills to acknowledge arid value diversity and to successfully educate students whose his-

tones and voices have been conveniently left out of the mainstream curriculum. As Gay (2001) stated

> Teachers, counselors, and administrators need to become conscious of their own cultural values and beliefs, of how these affect their attitudes and expectations toward students from different ethnic groups and are habitually exhibited in school behaviors. They also need to understand the effects of their values and beliefs on students, relative to the students' self-concepts, academic abilities, educational opportunities, and achievement outcomes, (p. 216)

Teachers must take the lead in the search for cultural exploration and understanding and in providing a learning environment that will accept a "multicultural dialogue" (Pullen, 2000). This multicultural dialogue begins with the recognition of the pervasive nature of culture and cultural diversity, the firm recognition that all human beings are the products of their culture and that people's lives, actions, beliefs, and attitudes are shaped by their life circumstances or culture (Ndura, 2003; Sanchez, 1999; West, 1993).

This article explores in-service teachers' cultural identity clarification process. Who do they say they are culturally, and how do they use their rediscovered cultural identity to explain the life experiences that they have had or lacked? Participants' names have been replaced by numbers T1-T34 to preserve their identity. After the description of the study, the findings are presented. A general discussion and conclusion follows.

Description of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine in-service teachers' awareness of their cultural identity. The question that guided the investigation was: How do the participants characterize their culture? The target population was composed of in-service teachers enrolled in the researcher's multicultural education course, which was a part of several Master's degree cohort programs offered by a state university in the southwest of the United States. Of the 34 teachers who participated in this study, 27 were women, and 7 were men. Thirty-two described themselves as White, one as Black, and one as Jewish. They, ranged in teaching experience from new to veteran and in age from the mid 20s to the 50s. They represented a variety of Christian religions.

The one ethnic minority participant (T3) was a male in his mid-20s who described his background as Native American and African American. He was married to a Native American female colleague. He grew up and worked in a multicultural and low socioeconomic area. He taught 6th grade. One of his objectives for taking the class was to learn "how to use [his] multicultural background in a way that will help the students feel more comfortable." The participant who identified himself as Jewish emphasized that the brand of Judaism taught and practiced in his family was much more a code of conduct and way to live their lives than a religion. He considered himself as "a minority race in a relatively religious area." (T24).

The public school student population in the state, as reported by the State Department of Education, is 55% White, 32% Hispanic, 7% American Indian and Alaska Native, 5% Black, and 2% Asian and Pacific Islander. The teacher-student cultural mismatch of this group of teachers is representative of the national trend. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of the in-service teachers in the state are faced with the challenge of educating students from cultural backgrounds that they may not know or understand.

The goal of the multicultural course in which the participants were involved, as presented in the course syllabus, was to explore cultural factors that impact the education of language minority students and ways to develop and implement programs and practices relevant to various cultures to promote parental involvement and increase students' academic achievement. The course also sought to expand the cultural horizon from which educators operate to provide genuinely multicultural instruction to all students. This study is based on a take-home midterm assignment that the participants completed for the course. Each class meeting was usually *5Vi* hr for a total of eight meetings. The course began with an extensive exploration of the nature and complexity of culture, followed by a presentation and discussion of the goals of multicultural education.

After studying and discussing the variables of cultural identity (Banks, 2001), usually during the second class meeting, the researcher asked the participants to write a position paper responding to the following prompt: "In a position paper, discuss the extent to which your own culture influences your relationship with culturally diverse students as well as your classroom practices." They had 2 weeks to complete the assignment. The first part of the paper had to include a thorough exploration of who they thought they were culturally. This is the part that is the focus of this article. The researcher collected 34 individual papers from the participants who chose to share their thoughts with other educators and thus generated the data for this study. These papers came from five separate cohort groups between summer 1999 and summer 2000.

The data analysis process began in fall 2001. First, the researcher read and reread the position papers to become familiar with the data in intimate ways, underlining relevant passages with colored highlighting pens (C. Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The data were then coded to identify main concepts and themes (Glesne, 1999; C. Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

According to Strauss and Corbin, "a concept is a labeled phenomenon" (p. 103). They added

> Phenomena are important analytic ideas that emerge from the data as concepts are labeled and categorized, and answer the question "what is going on here?" Phenomena depict the problems, issues, concerns, and matters that are important to those being studied, (p. 114)

Findings

The data revealed eight concepts or themes associated with the participants' characterization of their cultural identity: (a) a new discovery; (b) a typical/normal and rather simplistic phenomenon; (c) a source of pride, confidence, and satisfaction; (d) a shelter from the world of differences; (e) a limitation or barrier that leads to conflicts with different cultures; (f) a source of opportunity; (g) an evolving phenomenon; and (h) a reality that must be uncovered and confronted. These concepts and themes are discussed individually in this section.

Cultural Identity as a New Discovery

The self-reflective activity that generated the data presented here afforded the participants the opportunity to discover their cultural identity, for many of them, for the first time. Their view of cultural identity as a new discovery was exemplified by open and varied statements written in the participants' position papers like the following: "When I was growing up, I did not know a lot about my culture" (17).

> For the longest time... I didn't even consider myself having a culture. To me, 1 always related someone's culture with being from *a foreign* land, or having *strange* customs and beliefs ... I really didn't believe I was *special* in any substantive way. After spending just two days in this class, however, I realize that I am very much part of a culture, many cultures as a matter of fact. (Tl, italics added)

This new discovery of self sometimes led to the discovery of others. T18 shared her experience as a student teacher in an inner-city school with a very diverse student population. She remarked, "the economic level was extremely low and the home life of many students was nonexistent... Having to deal with so many primary needs such as food, shelter, and love took precedence over education at times." Realizing for the first time how different and privileged her world had been, she concluded, "This shock at how life is like only twenty minutes from my upper-middle class neighborhood *opened my eyes* to the need of teaching cultural appreciation and empathy" (T18, italics added). Like the major-

ity of the participants, T1, T7, and T18 identified themselves as White women—therefore, members of the American mainstream culture.

Cultural Identity as a Normal Phenomenon

Many participants characterized their culture as "typical" or "normal," almost as a simplistic phenomenon, thus demonstrating limited understanding of the powerful and determining influence of culture on individual and collective lives. T16 described her family as "the typical middle class white suburban family." T7 echoed the same attitude, "I grew up in a typical American family where I had a dad, a mom, two brothers and a sister. We had a house, two cars and a dog." T14 asserted, "we were a typical English family with afternoon tea and a Sunday roast for dinner." "I am just a little white girl from Ohio," Tl wrote.

Sometimes, an individual's own cultural identity is so embedded in the core mainstream culture that his or her microculture is seen as inconsequential or even trivialized. Consider the assertion made by T28, "I consider myself more of an American than Irish or German. My ethnicity seems to be more of a hobby or interest instead of a significant factor in my upbringing."

Cultural Identity as a Source of Pride, Confidence, and Satisfaction

The data showed that cultural identity inspires pride, confidence, and satisfaction. T27 asserted, "I was raised as a White Male Protestant of Anglo-Saxon descent. Let's face it, that put me at the top of the food chain in America and I knew it when I was growing up." "I am grateful for my Catholic upbringing," wrote Tl 1, "since it gave me a religious groundwork from which to compare other experiences." T10 noted, "There is no history of mental, emotional, or learning disabilities in my family. I was raised in a middle-class household in a middle-class neighborhood and attended middle-class schools. I am tall, have long blond hair and am fair skinned." For T14, pride, confidence, and satisfaction came from her social and financial status. She stated, "I am a white female ... in January, 1 will be 26 years old, but still the baby of my family. I am happily married, a Kindergarten teacher, and middle-class. I save some money every month (even for retirement)."

Pride, confidence, and satisfaction sometimes translate into a sense of power and entitlement, as demonstrated by T15's statement, "I am of the dominant culture and I was raised in this district." T17 echoed the same feelings, "the 'real' me is a product of a very happy, loving environ-

ment. I am very disciplined, organized, proud, and always overachieving." The same feelings of satisfaction and confidence were expressed by T22, "I am very fortunate to have grown up in a loving supportive home. I grew up knowing that I would attend college and receive my B A and my MA with full support of both my parents." And T34 attested, "My parents always were financially sound, so I was privileged and was given many things. Also, my parents never let me work until I was in college."

T27 wrote about his privileged position in the American society, "I suppose this has affected my level of confidence in my classroom, partly because of my WASP heritage. I don't feel threatened or scrutinized in front of my class. It is liberating in the sense that I don't have added pressures to conform to a dominant culture. I can stretch myself and try new things knowing that if I fail, I will not be judged by what I am."

Cultural Identity as a Shelter From the World of Differences

Cultural identity was also presented as a shelter that keeps mainstream participants from recognizing and understanding the diverse cultures that surround them, almost as an excuse for not knowing and not seeking to know. T17 blamed this on the lack of opportunities. She said, "In my elementary, school, we had all white middle class students. In my high school, we had four African American students and maybe five Hispanic students. It was very difficult to learn about other cultures and ethnicities at school, since the majority was white, upper middle class." Describing the area she grew up in as consisting of "mainly white Protestants," T19 concluded, "I was sheltered."

T23 echoed the sheltered voice, "I cannot remember having any friends that were not white. I also cannot remember having anyone in any of my classes that weren't white. I don't remember seeing any mentally retarded children or any classes for learning disabled kids. I don't even recall seeing or hearing about any kids attending classes with the speech teacher. I knew that other cultures existed, but they were not in the world that I grew up in."

T29 looked back at her life and concluded that she "led a very sheltered one" as she stated, "I lived in a middle to upper class neighborhood all throughout my schooling. Everyone in my school was Caucasian until I went to college. I went to college at Oklahoma State University, where once again Caucasian people surrounded me."

Living such a sheltered life makes any encounter with diversity an eventful and memorable experience. T32 shared, "Before the age of 12, 1 was raised in a predominantly white town. I was 7 years of age the first time I saw a black person. I remember the first day a South American girl started in my classroom." Like

T32, T23 remembered her 6th-grade class that had "three non-white students" and admitted, "up until that time, I never experienced that."

Cultural Identity as a Barrier

Cultural identity was also portrayed as a limitation or barrier that could lead to conflicts with other cultures. T33 commented that, even though she was around people of Mexican and African American heritage in Chandler, AZ, "they would not stay around." She wrote, "It was unheard of to have mixed races living in the same neighborhoods as the Caucasians." She explained, "There was a lot of unsaid DON'TS" and added, "people would talk about how wrong it was to mix races." These isolationist DON'TS were echoed forcefully in T32's statement," [My parents! were very quick to explain to me that if God had intended everyone to be equal, he would not have made people dif-. ferent shades of color. My parents exclaimed that if I were to marry someone outside the white race, neither my children nor I would ever be allowed in the family."

T2 made an unprecedented confession as she came face to face with the wall of separation: "I am white. A white supremacist father raised me. My mom has her definite prejudices ... Race, unfortunately, is heavily embedded in me. I do see race first, if different from my own. Common, unacceptable stereotypes are within me."

For T8, conflict resulted from simple things like students not looking her in the eye when she spoke to them. She explained, "I thought students had something to hide." "Students of diverse culture" who "visit the nurse often" irritated her. She clarified, "I was brought up to have a family doctor and only if a condition was serious would I consider seeing the school nurse. The proper channels were to wait until I could get home to my mother."

In addition to race and socioeconomic status, religion appeared to be another barrier-raising aspect of cultural identity. T34 indicated, "In the public school, it was hard for me to remember that not everyone in my class had the same beliefs I had." And T26 identified her problem as being the fact that she only associates with her *"church going* friends" (italics added). T33 pinpointed the source of her religious barrier, "My religious background was of Lutheran Orthodox. My parents would look upon other religions as though they were not good enough. The Lutheran religion was the only religion to believe in."

Cultural Identity as a Source of Opportunity

Participants also characterized their culture as a source of opportunity. It paved the way and provided the neces-

sary means to explore and dream. Writing about her family's opportunities, T10 stated, "We traveled extensively throughout Mexico and made many detours on weekend outings and saw many things. There were no boundaries for my family as far as where we could go or what we could do." T31 shared that, while she was in high school, she had the opportunity to serve as a youth ambassador to Skopje, Yugoslavia. T12 painted the same life of privilege and contentment, as she stated, "I had the privilege and opportunity to live in various states within the United States, and live [in] or visit many countries overseas."

Cultural Identity as an Evolving Phenomenon

Culture appeared to be an evolving phenomenon in some ways, as shown by the data. It evolved to slightly reveal a gleam of hidden realities that seem to punctuate the participants' unquestioned privileges and opportunities. These realities could be characterized as growth opportunities. T13 talked about her religious journey: "I am Jewish by nationality and Latter Day Saint by religion. I grew up hating Hitler and despising Jesus Christ. I was on a search for knowledge that eventually led me to a pure Christ, it was through my background and my conversion to be a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints that has given me quite an understanding and appreciation for differences of cultures and religions." This is a powerful statement of cultural identity transformation as an evolving phenomenon.

Academic experiences helped define T8's evolving culture. She shared, 'The real me includes a person who struggled through school and did not like school or was not successful at it until college." For T23, cultural identity evolved from a sheltered "young, blonde, female, Caucasian" to a "punk rocker" and "a smoker," out of choice. She concluded, "I think of myself as a minority during this time because this was a time in my life when people looked down on me for what I was doing."

T7 shared that she evolved from a "typical American family" to being raised in a low socioeconomic single-parent home. She wrote about her experiences in a wealthy high school in Scottsdale: "I never had designer clothes, the new car, the spending money, and it was very hard because I felt like an outcast. I felt very isolated and felt like other students looked down on me because I did not have a lot of money."

Cultural Identity as a Reality That Must Be Uncovered and Confronted

Finally, culture was characterized as a reality that must be unveiled and confronted. As he reflected on the pieces that had shaped his cultural identity, T30 wondered, "Maybe it was growing up in a single-parent home. Maybe it was being the youngest of four children and only three years old when my father died." T2, who identified herself as from a "strict Southern Baptist upbringing," unveiled and confronted her close-mindedness as she admitted, "I believe now that I have lost many opportunities to gain insight, appreciation, and understanding of a variety of religions/beliefs due to being closed-minded/unaware." Reflecting on her racial attitudes, she wrote, "Common, unacceptable stereotypes are within me."

The realities that T8 must face were no less compelling. She shared, "I did not even start college until after the birth of my second child at the age of 28. At the age of 18 my father died of a heart attack in my living room. I have divorced and raised a child on my own." Alcoholism was another reality that had to be confronted. Tl 1 stated, "Because I was brought up in a culture where drinking was prevalent, and because I have done more than my share of drinking in my lifetime, I understand drinking to a large extent." T20 echoed the same sentiment: "Being a child of an alcoholic marks me with a shared pain of others that live the same fate."

Discussion

It is evident from the previously mentioned findings that the participants had to dig deep into their individual, family, and societal roots to reveal the essence of their cultural identity. Several interesting questions could be raised from their perspective of cultural identity as a new discovery. Did the participants take their cultural identity for granted, as they never had to question or justify it? Was it simply a given and inconsequential societal attribute? Was it considered to be the norm that defines society since other cultures were viewed as "foreign," "strange," or even "shocking"? Could it also be implied that the lack of awareness of "self automatically denies the existence of the "other?"

The participants characterized their culture as a complex phenomenon that is considered pervasive, expected, accepted, and typical. In some ways, characterizing aspects of cultural identity as typical or normal implies that those who are different than the norm are atypical or abnormal and that one group has self-appropriated the power and right to define the norm and to determine who fits in and who does not.

They acknowledged that they draw pride, confidence, and satisfaction from their cultural identity, which is both a source of unlimited opportunities and a shelter from the outside world of diversity and strife. Culture as a source of pride, confidence and satisfaction, therefore, seems to be defined by naturally acquired privileges resulting from one's membership in the unquestioned mainstream status

quo. Moreover, there does not seem to be any significant barriers that could halt the attainment of these privileges. They are attained freely and are themselves the embodiment of freedom. By recognizing these opportunities that they may have taken for granted as a given until now, the participants may be beginning to realize that such privileges are not afforded everyone in society.

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Throughout the previously shared testimonials, there is an underlying shared understanding of living in middle- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods. They are predominantly White and are void of cultural diversity. This sheltered state of being is presented as a given, undisputable, and rather comfortable condition. Consequently, the absence of cultural diversity is rarely noticed, and when it is, it is also presented as a given, unquestioned condition. The participants admitted, however, that this newly defined identity could be blinding, as it physically, spatially, and emotionally separates them from those who live and act differently, which can sometimes cause conflicts and misunderstandings. However, it is not clear whether viewing an individual's cultural identity as a limitation or barrier to cultural exploration and understanding is subscribing to the scapegoat theory or whether it is a real handicap that has to be acknowledged and removed.

The participants also noted the evolving nature of cultural identity. Cultural identity as an evolving phenomenon, therefore, is somewhat of an eye opener, a window to some truths about diversity. Sometimes, the process leads to enlightenment, and sometimes, it forces the individuals to uncover and confront painful realities through which they claim their humanity. By confronting their own painful life realities, the participants may be starting to grasp the extent to which life experiences affect their students' behaviors and attitudes in and outside school. This connection has to occur before educa-

tors begin to understand and accommodate their students' diverse cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The goal of the self-reflective activity that generated the data for this article was to help in-service teachers make the connection between their culture and their worldview, as well as their attitudes and dispositions. This was important because cultural analysis is a prerequisite to identifying, understanding, arid solving cultural conflicts. As Trueba (1989) argued, "conscious and reflective analysis of cultural conflict presupposes a profound understanding of one's culture" (p. 45). Teachers may not manifest immediate change in their attitudes, but they will be engaged in the process, and each step in the right direction must be celebrated. Understanding themselves helps them "achieve a clearer concept of the powerful influence of cultural values on education-related beliefs and behaviors" (McGroarty, 1986, p. 313), and it helps them put their students' lives in perspective.

Helping teachers make this connection enables them to clarify and commit to their roles of peacemakers and border crossers who resolve to remember and help students to remember their own histories of struggle and who value diverse cultural and linguistic understandings of the world (Hones, 1999). These roles dictate a drastic change in teacher-student relationships as well as in teaching approaches and methodologies.

Teachers must become critical pedagogues whose task is "more than simply further legitimate shared assumptions, agreed upon proprieties, or established conventions" (McLaren, 1998, p. 234). They must make classrooms into "critical space that truly endanger the obviousness of culture as a collection of unalterable truths and unchangeable social relations" and within which teachers "excavate the subjugated knowledge of those who have been marginalized and disaffected, whose histories of suffering and hope have rarely been made public" (McLaren, 1998, p. 234).

An important recommendation for teacher educators is to afford pre- and in-service teachers, and anyone who is involved in the educational process, opportunities to examine their cultural realities and to come to terms with their own rediscovered cultural identities (Wilder, 1999). This can be achieved through participation in a formal course of study or other forms of sustained professional development. As Sleeter (1992) indicated, "teachers must develop a knowledge base about cultural diversity, acceptance of cultural differences and commitment to serve cultural minority communities and skills for translating multicultural education into action in the classroom"

(p. 33). This knowledge base begins with the exploration of, understanding of, and appreciation for their own cultural identities.

Another recommendation is to involve pre- and in-service teachers in activities that fully integrate them, individually and collectively, in the cultural diversity dialogue, as opposed to those that brand them as underinformed outsiders who must manage and absorb the challenges inherent to their increasingly diverse environments. In the study presented in this article, cultural exploration was spurred by a discussion of cultural identity and of how this frames an individual's worldview. Other activities that might spur cultural exploration are personal social contacts with culturally different people (Pate, 1981); research; and encounters with diverse life experiences through print, films, and other forms of media.

In any instance, critical self-reflection becomes an essential part of the learning process (Ndura, 2003), as it allows participants to "examine their own life experiences and the perspectives they have developed on the basis of those experiences" and to "come to terms with the limits of those experiences" (Sleeter, 1992, p. 211). Thus, they develop the skills and attitudes they need to understand and locate their students' cultural identities as well as their own within their societal contexts.

Two logical steps need to be considered once teachers have achieved a better understanding of their cultural identities. First, they need to explore ways in which their cultural identities influence their relationships with culturally diverse students. Thus, they can begin the process of identifying their own cultural stereotypes and biases that may cause conflicts among teachers and students in the classroom. As they become more comfortable with themselves and their students, in a cultural sense, they will begin to view cultural differences as a rich source of learning opportunities rather than a threat to classroom cohesion.

Second, teachers must examine the extent to which their cultural identities impact their classroom practices. They will need to critically analyze their instructional approaches and strategies; their selection, adaptation, and interpretation of instructional materials; and their classroom management styles. Taking a close and critical look at what and how they teach will hopefully empower teachers to design and involve their students in educational opportunities rich with the multiplicity of perspectives that is characteristic of culturally diverse classrooms and communities.

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