

# REFLECTIONS OF TEACHERS' CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM: Beginning to See and Hear

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**ABSTRACT:** This qualitative study investigated practicing teachers' characterization of their classroom practices and relationships with culturally different students after being engaged in three weeks of reflective activities surrounding cultural identity development and how culture shapes our worldview, dispositions, and behaviors. The study showed that through such engagement, the participants began realizing that they and their students were human beings whose experiences and perceptions are shaped by their cultural backgrounds. The study revealed that while teacher-student relationships were portrayed mostly as nurturing, they were hampered by tension resulting from a clash of cultures.

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## Introduction

Research has established a significant link between students' learning environment and their academic achievement (Esposito, 1999; Garcia, 2000; Latham, 1997). Classrooms that value students and their culture foster feelings of self-worth, a sense of belonging, and higher academic performance (Heath, 1983; Nieto, 1999; Thomas, 1998). In order to create such an environment, educators must examine their ideologies and practices relative to students, particularly minority students, whose communities' voices have often been silenced or neglected. This is particularly important in urban schools where teachers and students often come from divergent cultural and social backgrounds (Gutierrez, 2000), and where living conditions pose acute challenges to the teaching and learning process (Kozol, 1991, 1995; Rushton, 2000, 2001; Shipler, 2004).

Schools play a crucial role in the socialization of students, and they are not neutral sites. As Giroux (1988) asserts, "Schools establish the conditions under

which some individuals and groups define the terms by which others live, resist, affirm, and participate in the construction of their own identities and subjectivities” (p. 88). Schools, therefore, create a culture of either empowerment or denigrating conformity to the status quo. Consequently, teachers perform a social function that is never innocent (McLaren, 1998) because it is colored by their own cultural frames of reference.

An important step towards understanding the complex relationship between the school culture and the students’ diverse cultures is to acknowledge that both educators and students tend to generalize information about different social groups (Heath, 1986), that their individual cultural background is an essential aspect of their personal identity that influences their interactions with others and with the educational system (McGroarty, 1986), and that educational inequities cannot be addressed until the boundaries between school and community have been broken to encourage the flow of cultural patterns (Heath, 1983).

To this effect, educators must be afforded opportunities to engage in self-reflection in order to explore the cultural perspectives, values, hopes, and dreams that they bring to the classroom, examine their assumptions (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Gutierrez, 2000; Milner, 2003; Ndura, 2004;), and the extent to which these attributes influence their students’ perceptions and behaviors (Banks, 1997). They must also analyze the effects of their values and beliefs on their students’ self-concepts, academic abilities, educational opportunities, and achievement outcomes (Gay, 2001). The bulk of the responsibility to provide such opportunities to both pre-service and in-service teachers rests with institutions of higher learning whose mandate is to offer teacher preparation and professional development programs with the mission of preparing educators who can effectively serve increasingly culturally diverse schools and communities. It is this sense of responsibility that inspired the curriculum and learning activities in which I engaged the students who were enrolled in my multicultural education courses, which provided the context for this study.

This article discusses the reflections of teachers’ culture in their classroom practices and interactions with culturally diverse students, and expands on an earlier publication that explored in-service teachers’ cultural identity clarification processes (Ndura, 2004). 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” (Ndura, 2004, p.10). After a brief description of the study, the findings are presented, followed by a general discussion and conclusions.

## **Description of the Study**

This article presents the second half of the findings from a qualitative study that examined in-service teachers’ awareness of their culture and of the extent to

which their culture affects their classroom practices and relationships with culturally diverse students. Two questions guided the investigation that generated the data for this article: (1) how do the participants characterize their classroom practices from a cultural perspective, and (2) how do they characterize their relationships with culturally different students?

The data were collected from reflective essays written by 34 in-service teachers who were enrolled in a graduate multicultural education course in a mid-size public university located in the southwest region of the United States between summer 1999 and summer 2000. The course was designed to help the participants explore cultural factors that impact the education of language-minority students and ways to design and administer culturally relevant programs and practices to enhance parental involvement and students' academic performance.

The essays responded to the 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." The position paper had to be at least five pages long. In the paper, the participants were required to look inwardly to reflectively, honestly, and critically unveil and analyze the cultural lenses that color their practices and interactions as educators. More specifically, they were encouraged to look into the cultural trappings of their growing up, where they lived and whom they lived with; the family, friends, school, church, neighborhood; the experiences they had or did not have; and the world they were allowed to see through whatever media were available, then describe as best as they could how they became who they were (or thought they were). In a nutshell, they were to relate who they were culturally, and how their cultural identity influenced their attitudes, behaviors, and actions in the classroom.

The reflective essay task was assigned after 3 weeks of readings and discussions focusing on cultural identity development and clarification where the participants explored the multiple variables such as nationality, race, gender, socio-economic status, religion, age, etc. (Banks, 2001) that combine and intersect to shape their individual and collective cultures. For most of the participants, exploring their cultural background and its impact on their lived experiences in schools and society was a new challenge. The reflective essay represented a next step in the participants' journey towards self-discovery, and an attempt to help them relate their new understanding of self to their work and relationships with students in their classrooms. Thirty-two of the participants were white, one described himself as Jewish, and another one was a Black sixth-grade teacher who identified himself as African American and Native American. Twenty-seven participants were female, and seven were male. With the exception of the Jewish participant, the others represented a variety of Christian religions. They varied in age from the mid 20s to the 50s and in teaching experience from new to veteran. The students in their school system were 55% White, 32% Hispanic, 7% American Indian and Alaska Native, 5% Black, and 2%

Asian and Pacific Islander. In the discussion that follows, I use numbers T1-T34 to refer to the participants to protect their identity.

## Findings

### Reflections of Teachers' Culture in Classroom Practices

The classroom practices that the participants described were grouped into 10 conceptual categories: (a) accommodating students' needs and differences, (b) encouraging, (c) exploring diversity, (d) developing moral character, (e) building self-esteem, (f) confronting prejudice, (g) fostering cultural pride, (h) giving students a voice, (i) enforcing equal opportunity, and (j) integrating the curriculum. This section discusses these themes and concepts individually.

**Accommodating students' needs and differences.** Many participants described relevant activities designed to accommodate students' affective needs, while others discussed how they accommodated students' linguistic, religious, and socio-economic differences. T34 shared, "I had the kids share things with me that might be hurtful if said or done to another person. I then had them think of positive things they could say or do to make someone feel better. T32 encouraged students to "explain how they solved problems in their own languages on paper and in front of the class", and T29 sought computer programs in which "the language will not get in the way of their success. T11 stated, "I make the effort to find out if there are any religious dogmas affecting any situation at school that we both may be involved in. And I try to be sensitive and lenient to the student's position. I alter my themes if possible. A Halloween theme might be changed to a fall theme." Referring to students' lower socio-economic conditions, T10 helped children "deal everyday with what life has dealt to them, having never had the experience myself."

**Encouraging.** Participants performed this task through verbal admonition and by holding students to high expectations. T14 wrote, "I let children know that every possibility could be theirs. I encourage them to dream big." T34 asserted, "I am also very adamant about not allowing my kids to say they can't do something. I encourage them to continually try to do their very best." With regards to high expectations, T17 explained, "I do expect a lot from my students. I expect assignments to be turned in on time, I expect quality work, and I expect everyone to remember their names on their papers. I expect them to take care of their supplies and keep their belongings organized." Others encouraged their students to succeed by offering their own life experiences and achievements as role models to emulate, as illustrated in the following testimonials. "I have shared with my students how it feels to go to another country and be a different color with a different language; how it feels to be a minority" (T20). "I brag about myself, and the fact that I am twenty-four and have been teaching for a few years, and that I am currently working on my master's" (T22).

**Exploring diversity.** Attempts to explore diversity were mostly limited to discussions about similarities and differences as demonstrated by the following excerpts. “When questions arise in my classroom about religion, I am able to steer the discussion into positive directions and point out the similarities that religions have” (T27). T15 explained,

I have two kids that this is their first year in America. To the best of my ability in Spanish, I tried to explain the tradition of the American culture [Halloween]. To make them feel that I did not devalue their culture. I went to the library and found a movie on Dia De Los Muertos. I showed the movie in class. We talked about similarities and differences between the two holidays.

T1 wrote, “Since I teach English, it is very easy to weave multiculturalism, tolerance, and society’s biases into my lesson plans. Almost every story we read, or any writing assignment we do, can be made into an opportunity to teach about the similarities of us all.” Unfortunately, as the memo written about this statement indicates, the participant did not elaborate on “how, what and when” she weaved multiculturalism in her teaching.

**Developing moral character.** Without investigating reasons why culturally diverse students sometimes resort to lying and cheating, T8 lamented, “Another cultural trait I can not tolerate is students who find it acceptable to lie and cheat. These students wind up in trouble in my classroom where *I try to teach the value of honesty*” (emphasis added). She saw dishonesty as a cultural, instead of an individual problem. T3, an African American male, taught respect. He elaborated, “From the first day in my classroom, I talk to the students about respect. I explain to them, if they want to be respected they have to learn to respect others.” T1, who described herself as “a little white girl from Ohio”, shared, “because I am female, many of the Hispanic boys do not have respect for me. Respect and trust are things I must build from the beginning.”

**Building self-esteem.** Participants sought out and created opportunities for students to earn recognition and praise. T3 shared, “I give each child an opportunity to help and receive praise” (T3). T1 emphasized, “I was given much praise as a child, and so that is what I do with *these lost children*. I keep looking for the positives in their behavior and academics.” A few participants recognized some praiseworthy qualities in their students. “I try to focus on the qualities of individual students,” wrote T31. T13 praised each culture openly in her classroom. T22 stated, “I brag about how much farther some of them have gone knowing another language, playing an instrument, and being incredibly dedicated to a skill.”

**Confronting prejudice.** Only two participants discussed this concept. T16 shared one classroom experience, “Last week during a transition in class, I overheard one of my students talking about the Nazi’s [sic] being cool. Because

of the things I have experienced in my life I felt that it needed to be addressed. I stopped and confronted the student about what he had just said.” T2, a female participant, admitted, “I confronted the male students when I was offended by their prejudice based on gender.”

**Fostering cultural pride.** Some participants identified practices intended to foster pride in the students’ own cultures. T20 had her students talk about and share their cultures, religions and customs. One year they had a multicultural feast so they could taste all the good foods everyone had been describing all year. T28 used literature, story telling, and other visual props to enrich the environment and to honor the ethnic groups represented in the classroom. T7 emphasized, “I feel it is my job as an educator to let these cultures shine and come out in the classroom in as many ways as possible. One way I do this is by the selection of the stories I read to my students. I choose specific books for specific cultures I know I have in the classroom.”

**Giving students a voice.** This category of classroom practices had been initially labeled as “empowerment” in the margin memos. However, empowering students implies continuous opportunities to control their learning process and to critically evaluate their life experiences and societal practices that are favorable or unfavorable to them as minority youths. This is not what the participants said they were doing. Therefore “giving students a voice” seemed to be a more realistic conceptual representation of the participants’ identified practices. T29 played music in the computer lab while the students were working. She shared, “I let the students have a say in what music we listen to, although I have to approve.” T16 encouraged students to share their beliefs and culture with the class, while T5 allowed the students to be involved in some of the decisions that were made in the classroom.

**Enforcing equal opportunity.** This practice often appeared in acts of “fairness” and efforts to accommodate diverse learning styles. T11 wrote, “I try to give students a fair chance,” and T12 stated, “I am very conscious of who I call on. I make certain it is equally boys and girls, regardless of the subject. I try to be fair when assigning duties.” T6 reported that she used a list of students’ names as a check off sheet for certain activities to make sure she was “calling on everyone and not just certain students”. T14, T16, and T17 recorded the same attention to gender fairness. T17 also highlighted her inclusive classroom organization, “I have four rectangular tables; each can sit six children. My tables consist of a pretty even mixture of genders, races, behavior, and academic ability.”

**Integrating the curriculum.** T23 reported, “I always choose a wide variety of books that draw on many different experiences, cultures and settings.” T34’s geography students chose a culture and researched it to find out as much about it as they could. Similarly, T8’s students conducted research on a foreign country. She added, “I encourage them to choose a country that relates to their cultural background.” T25 tried to incorporate students’ prior knowledge and part

of their culture into her classroom, while T20 asserted, "I... love to read stories written by people of other cultures and I read many aloud." Other participants designed specific activities to accommodate different learning styles. T6 explained, "I try to incorporate Gardener's Multiple Intelligences often. Projects usually have a variety of ways to be completed. Students may write, illustrate, create a song or poem, make a diorama or present a skit to share the required information."

### **Reflections of Teachers' Culture in Their Classroom Interactions**

Data analysis revealed an intriguing phenomenon at this stage. Eleven participants did not address the teacher- student relationship issue. For the other 23, the limited information about how they related to culturally different students contrasted sharply with their elaborate descriptions of their cultural identity (Ndura, 2004). Two conceptual categories emerged from the participants' characterization of their interactions with culturally different students: nurturing or tense.

**Nurturing.** Participants portrayed themselves as givers of care, empathy, acceptance, and respect. They used their skills to help students feel good and to create a "nurturing" relationship. They could relate to their students thanks to their "shared experiences." T31, who once lived in a Texas town on the border with Mexico and attended an elementary school where she was part of the 5% minority Anglo population, clarified, "I can empathize with the students who come here from Mexico or any other countries and do not understand most of what is being said during classroom instruction. Not only do I empathize with students who do not understand the language being spoken but also with students who are in any minority group. I have understanding of being in the minority." For T1, compassion was a natural gender attribute. She explained, "I believe that because I am a woman/mother I view our society in a compassionate way... Even though I have not lived their sad experiences, I feel as though I can be empathetic to each one's problems..."

Participants' life experiences enabled them to better relate to their culturally diverse students. Reflecting upon his past academic experiences, T4 shared, "I knew the struggles I had academically, and I knew of the cold empty feelings of helplessness and rejection. I can relate to the educational struggles minorities and people of color experience." T12 "grew up as the daughter of a military father" and lived in various states and countries. She shared, "I can understand their anxiety about starting over and making new friends because I too had to do it." T28 related to the students' economic difficulties because she, too, had been there: "I have had economic reversals in my life, and do know what it is like not to have what others do."

**Tension.** The data revealed that cultural diversity often generates a tense relationship that is difficult to bear. Several participants highlighted religion as a

major source of cultural tension. The memo written at the end of T13's reflective account reads, "Teacher stresses her experiences in diverse countries / cultures, but cannot get over religious conflicts. She finds Jehovah Witnesses unpatriotic." She stated,

I must add that although I rejoice in cultures, I have had a conflict inside my American heart with a particular religious group called Jehovah Witness...I have found myself rather disturbed as we have stood to say the pledge and these students will not say it. It is a cultural conflict inside of me that a religion can prosper in a free country, and yet, the people of the religion will not show respect and gratitude for that freedom. It must sound strange, but the lack of caring for their freedom and the country truly does bother me.

T9, T14, and T15 expressed similar frustrations with Jehovah's Witnesses. "I have a student, Luke, who is a Jehovah's Witness. He does not celebrate any holiday or occasion. This is hard for me to understand and deal with" (T14). T9 shared her experience with her two students for whom she tried to make some accommodation: "I only have one complaint. When another student brings in birthday treats to share, these two kids don't want to sing Happy Birthday, but they like to enjoy the cake and juice." And T15 admitted,

I have a child who is a Jehovah Witness and she will not salute the flag nor participate in the singing of the National Anthem. I thought that it was disrespectful because how can you live in a country and partake of its freedom yet not honor it by saying the pledge of allegiance. This bothered me.

Diverse attitudes, behaviors, and actions that may be inherent to different cultures also strained teacher-student interactions. T8 lamented,

The culturally diverse child hopefully feels welcome and comfortable in my classroom though I know there are times when I may not feel comfortable. Culturally diverse students sometimes irritate me because I do not appreciate their entertaining manner. The cultural value of being on time can create a difficult relationship with culturally diverse students who do not value this trait and are tardy or have poor attendance... I still have quite a bit of trouble with culturally diverse students interrupting a conversation I may be having with another student or even another teacher. They do not see this as disrespect, but I do. Another cultural trait I cannot tolerate is students who find it acceptable to lie and cheat.

T1 perceived ethnicity and gender as causing tension. She elaborated,

My cultural background has also presented obstacles when working with these children. Since I am a white female, I am not to be trusted in their



eyes. Many times I have been accused of being prejudiced because I was white and they were not. Because I am female, many of the Hispanic boys do not have respect for me. I know they view me as the enemy because I am the authority figure they wish to rebel against.

For T21, tension sprang from her own attitude. She admitted, "I still have some stereotypes and prejudices, but I try to confront them the best I can."

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The study was conducted in order to foster participants' awareness of how their culture impacts their daily classroom actions and interactions, thus enhancing their sensitivity and empathy towards culturally different students as well as their instructional effectiveness.

The data suggest that teachers are actively catering to the needs of culturally diverse students. However, a closer and critical analysis of the classroom practices discussed above raises some serious educational issues. If teachers' responsibilities in the classroom can be classified into two categories representing their two most important roles, that is (a) to effectively deliver the required academic content, and (b) to create a safe environment that is conducive to the successful learning of the content, then the identified classroom practices reflect only half of the challenge. Although helping students "feel good" about themselves and their culture is a vital prerequisite to acquiring the necessary academic and professional skills to become a competitive member of society, neglecting the development of such skills amounts to leaving the main task undone.

Looking at the data from another angle, it is obvious that the participants revealed many assumptions pertaining to what effective teachers do in culturally diverse classrooms. Some of their practices could even be described as simplistic, almost as an indication that they were trying very hard to portray themselves as effective teachers since after all the reflective paper was an assignment to be read and evaluated by their professor. Nevertheless, the reflections are indicative of an emerging understanding that effective teachers acknowledge and validate culturally diverse students and the rich backgrounds that they bring to the classroom.

Teacher-student relationship is pivotal to the teaching and learning experience. For culturally diverse students, this relationship takes on an even greater sense of urgency since educators are major gatekeepers in the system. This relationship must thus be elevated beyond the simple façade of nurture to empowerment. In such a relationship, teachers become the ultimate educators who guide, enlighten, and challenge students to achieve to their highest potential. They respect and nurture culturally diverse students, not because they are seen as disadvantaged individuals in dire need of compassion, but because

they are intelligent and capable youths with valuable dreams and strong potential to raise their families and society to new heights.

Reflective self-analysis helps teachers examine and question their role as educators and the role of education in general (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Gutierrez, 2000; Milner, 2003; Ndura, 2003). As Shaul (1993) argues, educators either prepare students to conform to the existing societal order or empower them to transform their world. Freire (1993) elaborates that education must be the practice of freedom rather than domination because a liberating education “denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (p. 62). Consequently, educators need to understand that as sheltered as they may be from the societal challenges that face their culturally different students, they share a common destiny because the world cannot exist apart from its people, and this includes minority students.

Minority students, therefore, need teachers who can “affirm cultural identity, praise academic performance, and provide effective learning situations” (Pang, et al, 1999, p. 2). They need teachers who are transformative intellectuals who take seriously the need to give students an active voice in their learning experiences; teachers who understand that knowledge is power and that students must be afforded the opportunity to understand themselves critically as part of society (Giroux, 1988). Therefore, teachers must view the students’ backgrounds and life styles, “not as a hindrance to educational advancement that must be corrected or circumvented, but a legitimate and powerful resource for improving students’ performance in schools and the process of schooling” (Diaz, et al, 1986, p. 225).

Diversity continues to increase within the schools and society (Kirmani & Laster, 1999) and this is a concern for educators who see this growth as a challenging and even frightening trend. Ignoring the overt and covert conflicts caused by cultural misunderstandings as well as the prevailing educational and societal inequities will turn diversity into a negative and divisive phenomenon. Data in this study made cultural conflicts between teachers and students apparent. Hence, dialogue must be initiated and sustained between the different cultural groups inside and outside the school system in order to enable all parties to express their fears and frustrations, to voice their hopes and expectations, and most importantly, to validate their respective narratives. Educators must thus become culturally responsive practitioners (Smith, 2004) and continue to renew and extend their skills and knowledge through sustained professional development that is centered around reflective practice in order to remain effective in culturally dynamic educational institutions and to work toward social change (Finley, 2000). In many ways, rather than being an indication of effective practice, the data presented in this paper show that self-reflection gives educators an opportunity to begin to see and hear themselves and their students as human beings whose life experiences have been shaped by different cultures and circumstances. Until

these cultural differences are explored, educators will continue to disassociate themselves culturally and socially (Hollins, et al., 2004) from the students whose lives they are supposed to help improve.

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