

How to  
Teach Students  
Who *Don't*  
Look Like You



EDITION

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES



**Bonnie M. DAVIS**

FOREWORD BY CURTIS LINTON

How to  
Teach Students  
Who *Don't*  
Look Like You

2  
EDITION

*Dedicated to Dan Alpert*

*You cause positive change in the world*

*and*

*To all the teachers who take risks to improve their classroom instruction  
and passionately believe that ALL children can learn at high levels*

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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>vii</b>
<i>Curtis Linton</i>	
<b>Preface</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>xvii</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>xxi</b>
<b>How to Read the Book</b>	<b>xxiii</b>
<b>PART I. LOOKING INSIDE OURSELVES</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Our Culture: The Way We View the World</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Reflection Questions for Examining Our Inner Selves</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3. Exploring Our Racial Identity Through Our Racial History</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>4. What Is Race?</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>5. A Day in the Life . . .</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>PART II. LISTENING TO AND LEARNING FROM OTHERS</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>6. What Do We Need to Know About Culturally Diverse Learners?</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>7. Latino/a/Hispanic Learners: A Personal Story</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>8. New Immigrant Learners of the Twenty-First Century</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>9. What the Research Says About Learning Gaps</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>10. How to Build Relationships With Culturally Diverse Students and Families</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>11. Creating a School Culture That Welcomes Students, Staff, and Families</b>	<b>123</b>

<b>PART III. INTEGRATING NEW KNOWLEDGE</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>12. Strategies to Teach and Engage Culturally Diverse Learners and ELs</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>13. Moving Students From Apathy to Passion: Learning to Love Reading and Writing</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>14. Standards-Based, Culturally Responsive Lessons That Engage Learners</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>15. Readers and Writers Workshop: A Model for Standards-Based, Culturally Responsive Instruction</b>	<b>183</b>
<b>16. Teachers in Today's Classrooms Share Their Lessons</b>	<b>195</b>
<b>PART IV. A CALL TO ACTION</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>17. A Call to Action: Sponsoring Academic Student Support Groups</b>	<b>241</b>
<b>18. A Call to Action: Taking Care of Yourself</b>	<b>259</b>
<b>References and Resources</b>	<b>267</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>279</b>

# Foreword

I distinctly remember the first time I filmed an interview with Bonnie Davis shortly after the first edition of *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You* was published. Sitting in her Southern California apartment, Bonnie emphatically stated, “Teachers don’t brag enough!” When I asked her to explain, Bonnie recounted her experience as a high school English and writing teacher when she learned how to connect with students from a wide variety of backgrounds. She shared how she discovered that she was a *very good* writing teacher, but not a great math teacher. She not only knew internally for herself, but would tell students directly, “If you need to write a great college acceptance essay, come to me! If you need help on math, go somewhere else.” Through her years of teaching, researching, and studying, Bonnie discovered explicitly what it took for a teacher to successfully connect with each and every student, no matter where that student came from, nor how different the student might be from Bonnie.

This forthrightness of a teacher’s skills and abilities is profound in the life of a student—students enter school not to collect seat time or even grades, but to prepare themselves for the intimidating world that lies beyond the school walls. This is made even more intense for students who do not fit the majority norm in terms of race, economics, language, and background. Today’s youth rely on teachers who will stretch themselves to meet the needs of the student. It begins with the teachers changing their practices, beliefs, assumptions, and biases, and ends with the student succeeding because a caring adult has provided equitable access and support to the necessary learning. In order for students to succeed, the paid professional—the teacher—must change what she or he does to support the learning and engagement of each and every child in the classroom.

The very title of this book, *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You*, speaks truth to the fundamental reality of achievement gaps within schools—the overwhelming majority of teachers are white, middle class, and female, whereas the students on the negative side of the achievement gap are overwhelmingly of color, from poor backgrounds, and increasingly male. Now that Bonnie has spoken truth to an issue that tends to be untouchable—race and racial privilege—the conversation can finally move to what to do about this educational reality. Bonnie wrote this second edition in order to incorporate important new learnings, insights, concerns, and experiences she has gained over the past six years since the first edition was released. Not content to just raise the issue, Bonnie addresses it directly: what does a teacher need to do daily in the classroom to transcend the differences between her- or himself and the student?

Bonnie is fundamentally a practical teacher, and that is the reason why she has so successfully helped thousands of teachers modify their day-to-day

practice in the classroom. I have always deeply appreciated Bonnie's ability to bring me down to earth in my work, writing, and ideas. This is what she brings to teachers: direct and applicable strategies that address the skills, beliefs, dispositions, and strategies a teacher needs to apply on a day-by-day basis in the classroom. After having filmed thousands of highly effective teachers across the United States, I can attest that what Bonnie proposes herein is substantiated by the observed practices of the very best teachers. These strategies are key to academically succeeding with today's diverse students.

Within this practical framework, Bonnie has identified clear classroom examples on video that you can access to see these strategies in practice. My company, the School Improvement Network, has partnered with Bonnie to feature these video segments on our on-demand professional demand platform, PD 360. To access these videos, go to <http://www.schoolimprovement.com/experts/bonnie-davis>.

As a reader of this book, you will have ongoing complimentary access to these resources. Follow the instructions on this page to access these classroom examples and engage in an online dialogue with other educators who are applying these strategies in classrooms in every state and province. This online community, moderated by Bonnie, will be your gateway to model classroom examples, new strategies, lesson ideas, and reflection on who you are as a teacher—and what you have done to connect with students who differ from yourself.

Education has entered a promising new age of rapid progress and accelerating expectations. The goal of college and career readiness has been established for every student, which means that a school's duty now is to assure that students gain the necessary knowledge and skills to engage successfully in college-level study and advanced career training. Students can only gain this type of proficiency by engaging in a personalized learning environment wherein they learn at an optimized level determined by their individual readiness and self-driven pace.

The only way this high and lofty educational goal of college and career readiness can be achieved is by each and every teacher knowing how to individually support and facilitate the learning of each and every student. If difference between teacher and student presents any type of a learning barrier—whether overt or hidden—the student will not rise to his or her potential in the classroom. When a teacher knows how to effectively teach students who differ from her- or himself, that is a teacher who can succeed with every student.

This is the power of an equitable education—a learning environment that guarantees each and every student will receive the individualized support they need to succeed. And this is the power of Bonnie's work—explicitly laying out what a teacher has to do day by day to help every student successfully prepare for his or her exciting life that lies ahead. After engaging in this learning, my hope is that you will go forth and apply these strategies step-by-step every day—your students will be the lucky beneficiaries!

*Curtis Linton*  
*Vice-President of Content Development*  
*The School Improvement Network*

# Preface

**S**ix years after the publication of *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You: Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies* (2006), I am at it again, writing my teaching life. I have had the good fortune to continue to work with educators across the country during these years and have learned and grown through the work. These educators work in urban schools, suburban schools, and rural areas, and I support them through ongoing workshops, observations, coaching, e-mails, and phone conversations. After working three to five years in several districts with scores of different teachers, I can document their progress from isolation to collaboration, including their use of culturally responsive strategies, peer observation, and professional learning groups. As a result, I realized I needed to write a new edition of this book to update the research in the field and give you access to the latest and best I have learned.

## WHAT IS NEW?

This new edition contains the following new material:

- Updated research on culturally diverse learners
- Updated research on classroom instruction
- Common Core State Standards
- How to teach English language learners
- How to teach Latino/a/Hispanic learners
- How to teach new immigrant learners
- A chapter examining what race is and is not
- Suggestions for using technology and PD 360 alignment
- New engagement strategies for culturally diverse learners
- New lessons created by teachers using them in their classrooms today
- Additional student support models
- A wellness chapter for you, the teacher!

The book contains a wealth of new material, research, strategies, narratives, and lesson plans to be both a resource for you and a companion on a journey as we travel together in our quest to become more culturally responsive in our instruction.

## WHAT IS STILL THE SAME?

I am *still* an older White female who can only share with you what “I know I know” at this time in my journey to understand culture, race, class, gender, and students who don’t look like me. I can’t write this book with the understanding or life experiences of a Person of Color or a young student in today’s world. I will never know or understand their experiences. I consider myself an antiracist, yet I must remember, “even antiracist educators reproduce a racialized social system” (M. Pollock, 2008, p. 348). I have no other choice; I am part of the system. To continue this work, I pledge to do my best and work within this unequal system to try and change it. This book is my attempt to do that, but it is only what *I know I know* at this time in my journey.

Another thing that is still the same is the focus on African American students. African American children were the students I taught who did not look like me and the students I wrote about in my first book, *African American Academic Achievement: Building a Classroom of Excellence*, which I self-published in 2001. When I wrote *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You*, I incorporated most of the self-published book within the body of the new book. As a result, even though this book contains no chapter dedicated solely to African American students, they are still a majority focus, and examples of African American student experiences are woven throughout the book. In addition, much of the earlier book is retained, based on the feedback from thousands of educators who have used it as a learning journey.

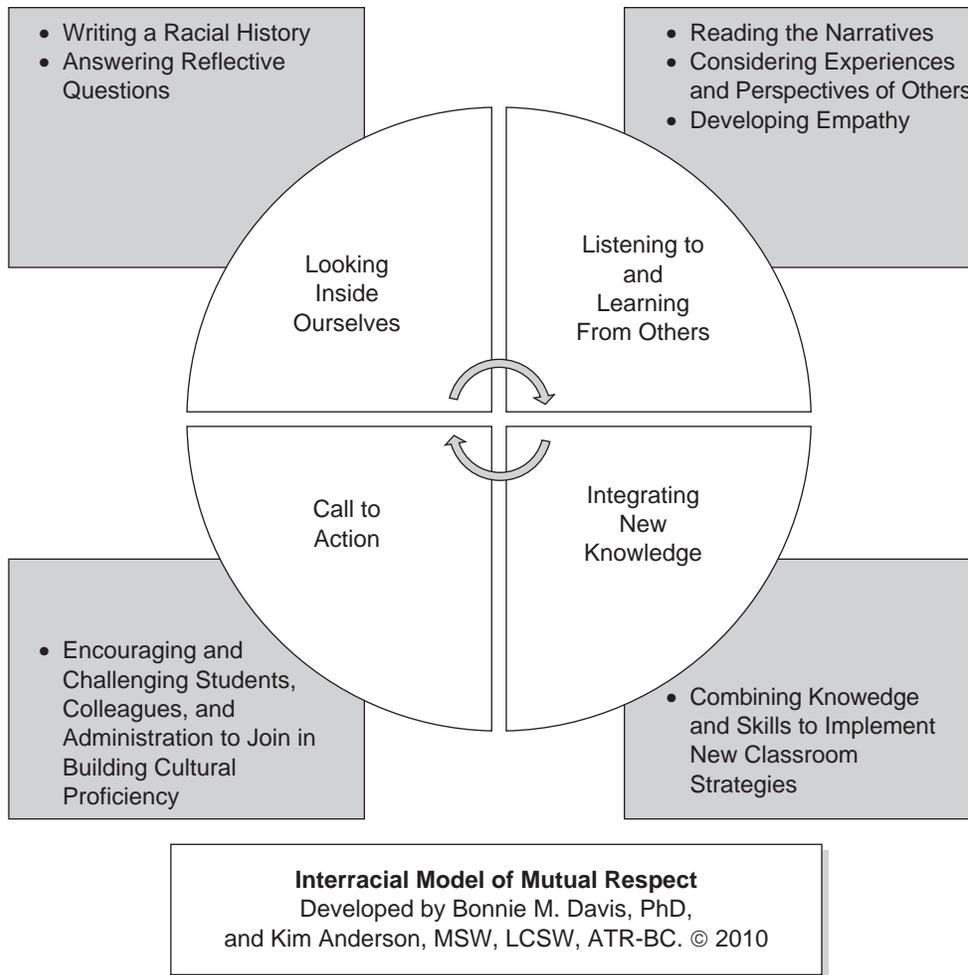
## THE JOURNEY FRAMEWORK

Feeling the need to conceptualize this learning journey within a framework, I was fortunate to work with Kim Anderson, a licensed clinical social worker and expressive arts psychotherapist, to create a model for us to use as we tackle the challenge of becoming culturally responsive to the diverse learners in our schools. This model, cultural consideration and equity skill building, has evolved over time in three additional books: *The Biracial and Multiracial Student Experience: A Journey to Racial Literacy* (Davis, 2009); *Culturally Considerate School Counseling: Helping Without Bias* (Anderson, 2010); and *Creating Culturally Considerate Schools: Educating Without Bias* (Anderson & Davis, 2012). In this book, however, we return to the most direct model to begin our journey.

This framework is a simple flowchart of four steps:

- Looking inside ourselves
- Listening to and learning from others
- Integrating new knowledge
- A call to action

We name this journey a journey of *cultural consideration* because we believe that cultural consideration supports the inclusion of all aspects of culture while stemming from the basic principle of respect. This term also differentiates our work from others in the field. At the same time, we respect, acknowledge,



and cite in this book those pioneers and current thinkers in the fields of social justice, diversity, and cultural responsiveness.

## EQUITY 101

In addition to the work with cultural consideration, I worked with Curtis Linton, coauthor of *Courageous Conversations About Race* (Singleton & Linton, 2006), on a series of books titled *Equity 101*. In these books, we explore the issue of equity through the lens of expectations, rigor, relevancy, and relationships. Curtis and I coauthored *Culture and Practice* (Linton & Davis, 2012), two of the books in the series. These books offer an in-depth look at both the culture of your school and the instruction in your classrooms. Aligned with this series, the School Improvement Network offers online videos of teachers through their PD 360 professional development tool. This online tool allows teachers to observe other teachers using culturally responsive strategies in their classrooms. I am one of the teachers in the videos, along with hundreds of others.

This book contains references to these videos, so you may check them out as you read about the strategies in the book (see <http://www.schoolimprovement.com/experts/bonnie-davis>).

## **CULTURAL CONSIDERATION AND EQUITY SKILL BUILDING**

Passionate about the issue of equity, I see this book as one tool for investigating what equity looks like in our classrooms and what strategies we can use to support it daily. For me, these strategies include instructional strategies, cultural strategies, and relationship strategies; therefore, this book focuses on these strategies. With an emphasis on strategies and equity skill building, we use the model of cultural consideration and equity skill building to support our journey in this new edition of *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You*. As you begin this journey, what do you want? Do you

- Search for strategies to engage students and close the achievement and learning gaps?
- Seek to understand the cultural differences of your students?
- Look for ways to build relationships across cultures?

If you are like many teachers, you continue to look for ways to improve your classroom instruction. As a classroom teacher with more than four decades of experience, I, too, was always searching for new strategies, understandings, and lessons to support the changing population of students who yearly entered my classroom.

This book is a result of that search. It is an organic document, one that can continue to grow as you interact with the book and your colleagues.

The chapters take you through the following stages:

- A general recognition of culture and how it shapes the lens through which you and others view the world
- The personal narratives and racial histories of educators
- A discussion of race and its impact on learners
- An examination of research on culturally diverse student cultures
- A discussion of achievement and learning gaps
- How-to strategies for teaching within a Common Core State Standards–based learning environment
- Research-based instructional strategies (K–12) to implement across the disciplines with a focus on literacy
- Several academic and leadership support group models
- Suggestions for owning your own wellness
- A references and resources section
- Alignment with PD 360 online professional development videos and support

You can read the chapters in the above sequence, or you can open the book anywhere and read an individual chapter, much like a book of short

stories tied together by a common theme. You can read and respond in the book, using it as a private book study and a professional development tool. Or you can use it with your professional learning groups and collaborative staff meetings. The chapters are educator friendly and meant to be discussed and responded to informally and honestly. The research, strategies, and culturally considerate classroom lessons found in the book are designed to support and improve the academic achievement of all learners, especially culturally diverse learners.

## **HOW DID YOU LEARN WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT TEACHING?**

How did you learn what you know about teaching? I learned what I know about teaching from men in a prison, women in a homeless shelter, and affluent middle schoolers, as well as high school and college students in suburban, urban, and rural areas. The men taught me that even though the common denominator in our prisons is poverty, it does not equate to a lack of intelligence. Some of the most intelligent and best writers I taught were these men. The women in the homeless shelter taught me that our students must find and share their voices in the classroom, for when we allow students to find their voices, their writing glows. All too often students in our society lack this opportunity, and they sometimes find less productive means of “screaming” who they are. Also, they taught me that our lessons must connect to the lives of our students in order to engage learners and support them in attaining skills for career readiness and college. And scores of middle schoolers from an affluent school district taught me that it was not enough to walk into their classroom with a doctorate in English and more than twenty years of teaching experience at the high school and college levels—these children demanded instruction that challenged and engaged them. No longer could lectures grab and keep their attention. I had to learn what “I didn’t know I didn’t know” about good instruction. I learned from all of my students during the thirty years I spent in the classroom and the fifteen years since I worked with adult educators, and that learning is found in this book. This book focuses on students who may not look like you, may not come from similar backgrounds, and may not approach learning like you. Just as the student populations I have taught have informed my instruction, your students speak to you with their needs (or perhaps they scream at you with their needs). In addition, your life experiences add to your teaching repertoire.

## **WHO ARE CULTURALLY DIVERSE LEARNERS?**

Who are culturally diverse learners? They are the homeless children, the migrant children, and the immigrant children learning English. They are children dealing with gender issues and those with learning disabilities. They are special needs children, as well as children from diverse cultures—students perhaps not previously included or successful in our classrooms. To provide

these learners with culturally responsive instruction, we must build relationships and hold high expectations, provide rigorous content knowledge while making explicit the hidden rules of learning, and teach students how to learn as well as what to learn.

## WHO IS THE AUDIENCE FOR THIS BOOK?

You are! This book goes beyond instruction and offers you a special opportunity to dig deep inside yourself. Unlike many excellent books that provide research-based instructional strategies, this one includes a section that focuses on race and privilege and its impact on educators: one Black American female and one White American female, the mother of mixed identity children, and one White American male, the father of Asian children. Reading their stories and discussion of the topic of race gives you a glimpse into the racial complexities of our educational landscape and examines a topic seldom found in educational literature. These chapters are designed not for the timid but for educators ready and willing to examine privilege in our society and continue this personal and professional journey into understanding the impact of race.

Who is the audience for this book?

- First and foremost, this book is for teachers from a teacher. The information and strategies are for preservice teachers, beginning teachers, veteran teachers—all of us.
- Administrators at every level who wish to enhance the knowledge base of their staff and provide opportunities for collegial dialogue and learning.
- Professional development chairs, supervisors, mentors, and coaches whose job it is to encourage teachers and provide culturally responsive materials for them.
- Professional learning communities, whether they be a group of two or 200.
- College and university instructors and their students in preservice and graduate courses in which students need or require information on culturally diverse learners.
- Central office administrators engaged in a districtwide effort to become more culturally responsive and close learning gaps.

## SET GOALS FOR YOURSELF

As you read, consider setting goals. For example, you may wish to read this book in order to improve instruction or make your instruction more culturally responsive: your end result may be improved student achievement. Your goal or action plan may include one chapter per week of study with your professional learning group, followed by trying one new strategy and reporting back the following week on its effectiveness. You may even want to include peer observations. Whatever you decide, setting goals tunes our brain to focus on our needs and to filter out the rest.

Alan Blankstein, in *The Answer Is in the Room: How Effective Schools Scale Up Student Success* (2011), reminds us that, yes, the answer is in the room, and the most valuable resource you have is “focused commitment over time” (p. 42). Therefore, you may find repetition in the book; some strategies are repeated in more than one place. This continues to focus and, hopefully, commit you to trying the strategies. Join your professional learning group (or start a new one) and discuss together as you read, study, and reflect your way through the book. I welcome your professional conversation, comments, and suggestions. You may e-mail me at [a4achievement@earthlink.net](mailto:a4achievement@earthlink.net).

Enjoy!



# Acknowledgments

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# About the Author



**Bonnie M. Davis, PhD**, is a veteran teacher of more than forty years who is passionate about education. She has taught in middle schools, high schools, universities, homeless shelters, and a men's prison. She received her bachelor's degree in education, her master's in English, her MAI in communications, and her doctorate in English. Dr. Davis is the recipient of numerous awards, including Teacher of the Year in two public school districts, the

Governor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference Community Service Award. She has presented at numerous national conferences, such as Learning Forward, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Council of Teachers of English, National Association of Multicultural Education, and others.

Dr. Davis's publications include the first edition of this book, *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You: Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies*; as well as *How to Coach Teachers Who Don't Think Like You: Using Literacy Strategies to Coach Across Content Areas*; *The Biracial and Multiracial Student Experience: A Journey to Racial Literacy*; and *Creating Culturally Considerate Schools: Educating Without Bias* with coauthor Kim L. Anderson. Other publications include the *Equity 101* series with coauthor Curtis Linton and numerous articles on diversity and literacy instruction.

Dr. Davis provides professional development services to districts across the country, giving keynotes, workshops, and ongoing support through her consulting firm, Educating for Change. She may be reached at [www.educatingforchange.com](http://www.educatingforchange.com) or by e-mail at [a4achievement@earthlink.net](mailto:a4achievement@earthlink.net).



# How to Read the Book

**A**s stated in the preface, you can read this book, much like a book of short stories, by beginning with what interests you most—but *please* read the preface first. Each chapter can stand alone. Or you can read this book from beginning to end, hopefully discussing the book with your colleagues in a professional learning group. You will find repetition in the book since many of the strategies fit in more than one place, but this offers you the opportunity to acquaint yourself again with multiple ways to use the strategies.

## DISCLAIMERS

Throughout the book, terms referring to student groups are used interchangeably since they are interchanged in many of the articles and books written about these students. Also, in some cases, the labels for identities and races are capitalized and in other cases they are not, based on the context and the sources of the information. Finally, the educators who wrote for this book occasionally use capitalization and grammatical constructions that may differ from the preferred Corwin style. These constructions remain in order to retain the integrity, individuality, and voice of the narrator.

## LOOKING INSIDE

The first five chapters offer you the opportunity to look inside, reflecting on your cultural lens, racial identity, the construct of race, and the daily lives of educators who both look like and don't look like you. We begin with what may be considered the hardest part of the journey, and it builds a foundation as we move outward, examining the lives of students who don't look like us.

## LISTENING TO AND LEARNING FROM OTHERS

In Chapters 6 through 11, the journey focuses on listening to others and learning from them. What is it you *don't know you don't know* about students who do not look like you? How can the research inform your practice?

## **INTEGRATING NEW KNOWLEDGE**

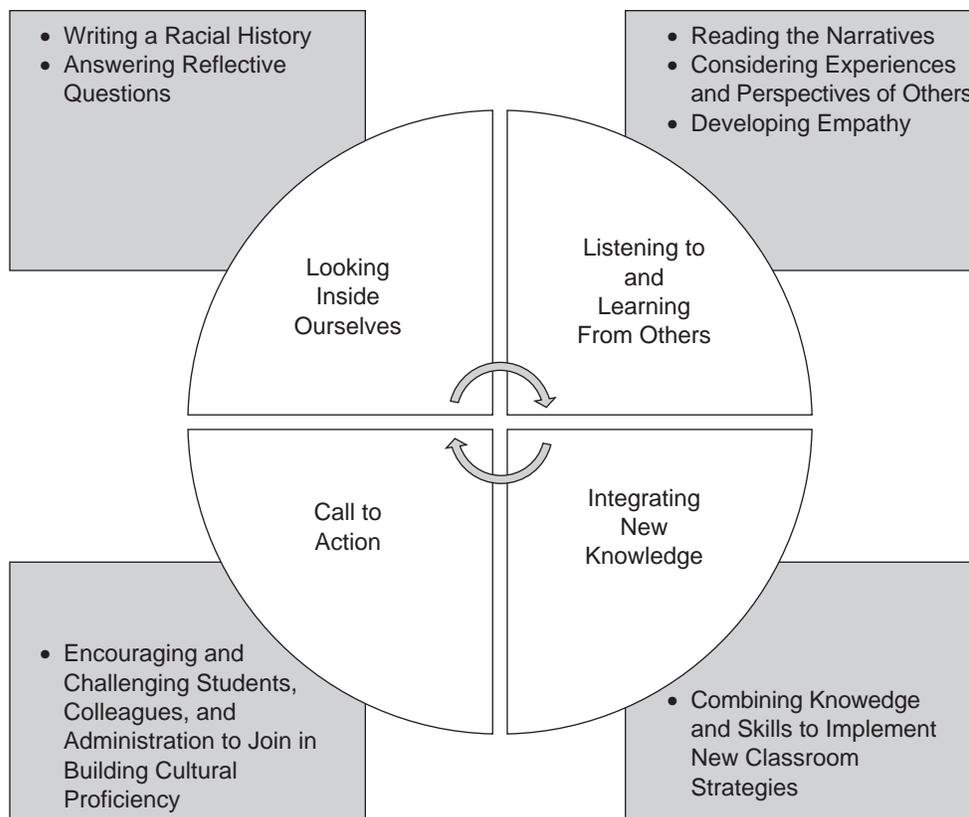
The third part of the journey, Chapters 12 through 16, focuses on instruction. This section may feel like a different book, but it really is the same book actualized in the classroom. You learn lots of instructional strategies, and you find many lessons created by teachers in today's classrooms. Create your own lessons using the models and enjoy!

## **A CALL TO ACTION**

Chapters 17 and 18 are the final part of the journey and focus on a call to action. What can you do to support the academic achievement of students who don't look like you? What can you do to take care of yourself? What can you do to encourage your colleagues to continue the journey with you?

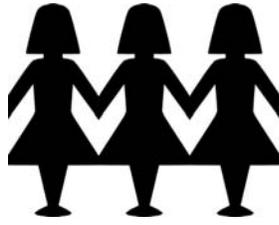
# PART I

## Looking Inside Ourselves



**Interracial Model of Mutual Respect**  
Developed by Bonnie M. Davis, PhD,  
and Kim Anderson, MSW, LCSW, ATR-BC. © 2010





# 1

## Our Culture

### *The Way We View the World*

**H**ow do you view the world? My granddaughter, age four, already categorizes people by how they look based on their skin color. When a White person comes into her preschool, she speaks English, and when a Person of Color arrives, she speaks Spanish. My granddaughter is Mexican, Black, White, and Puerto Rican. How does she see the world? She sees the world through the lens of a young child who already understands that skin color places us in different groups. At four, she just thinks it has to do with language rather than power. She is brown and does not look like me. Her father, my son, has an African American father. He is Black and does not look like me. My experience as the biological White mother of a Black male and grandmother of a child of mixed ethnicity and racial identity is one of the reasons I wrote this book, a how-to book for you, educators who fill today's classrooms and search for better ways to connect with and teach students who don't look like them. Having taught English for thirty years in public schools, I want to share, in my experience, what works and what doesn't.

This book is a new edition. The first edition was read by thousands of educators, and for this, I am honored and grateful. This new edition evolved because of the following: new research and developments in education since 2006; the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the challenges they present; advances in technology; new research and practices for culturally diverse learners, including English language learners (ELs) and new immigrant learners; and issues of color and race that continue to affect learners. In addition, I have learned, and want to share strategies, as a result of working with thousands of educators across the country. Also, the earlier edition barely touched on the Latino/a experience and ELs. Yet with the arrival of my granddaughter and my personal introduction to Latino culture, I knew I needed to include research about and strategies for the fastest growing group of children entering our schools today—Latino/a learners. As a result, in this book, there are new and expanded sections on Latino/a learners, as well as twenty-first century

immigrant learners. These additional sections, along with more personal narratives and many more how-to strategies, build on the first edition and offer a more comprehensive resource for your instructional practice.

## WHAT ABOUT YOU?

What do you see when you enter your school? If you are like many teachers, you see a sea of smiling faces, some that look like yours and others that don't. This book offers you an opportunity to read and think about those children who may not look or even think like you. The first five chapters in the book build background knowledge about your cultural lens and how you view culturally diverse learners in your classroom and school. In Part II, we examine our inner worlds as we navigate the outer world and sometimes experience it differently based on our race, gender, ethnicity, age, class, sexual orientation, and other factors. The remainder of the book offers an examination of the learning environment and classroom instruction. This book combines the affective and the cognitive, the *what* and the *who* of teaching, the external and the internal worlds in which we live and work. Let's begin with the children you see when you walk into your school.

### **Describe the children in your school.**

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### **Describe the faculty and staff in your school.**

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### **Describe yourself.**

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## HIDDEN RULES: BEHAVIOR EXPECTATIONS

Hopefully, you are reading this book with others, either in a book study with your staff or within your professional learning group. If you are, you are working and discussing with others. When we work in a group, we must understand

what is expected of us. Similarly, when we work with students, we must state explicitly what we expect of the learners in our classrooms. Many students just seem to “know” what to do and expect in our classrooms. However, others, often our diverse learners, may not be privy to the hidden rules or unspoken codes of our classrooms. These hidden rules or unspoken codes offer immense power to those who wield them. We who possess the knowledge of our hidden rules are the gatekeepers to success or failure for those who do not possess the knowledge (Delpit, 1997). Because of this, we must be sensitive to the cultural lenses of our diverse learners and create an equitable field of opportunity for all.

In order to have an equitable playing field of opportunity, we must state clearly our behavior expectations for the task at hand. In discussions, many adults and students hesitate to give input when the discussion focuses on such scary subjects as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or culture. Many remain silent rather than risk offending another human being. In order to support open discussion, we offer a set of expectations stated below. During your work with this book, the facilitator can present group expectations, model them, and set the tone for the discussion. This is good teaching. It also gives the facilitator the authority to intervene if a participant interrupts another speaker or speaks out of turn. In other words, the facilitator states explicitly the expected hidden rules or unspoken code of an educational setting. The teacher must do the same in the classroom.

Consider using the following expectations for your group’s work with this book: *Today, we examine issues that challenge us to think deeply and respond honestly. We need to agree to follow behavioral expectations.*

- Take care of yourself. If you need to leave the room, do so. (Obviously, this one is for participants in a presentation or workshop, not your classroom.)
- Safeguard your reflective time by remaining quiet; then share during sharing time.
- Listen deeply. Do not interrupt anyone who is speaking. Wait until the person has completed his or her statements.
- Do not hog airtime. Share airtime equally with your colleagues. Each person has unique and valuable comments to contribute.
- Leave your outside concerns outside the room. Focus deeply on the stated topic.
- Save a few minutes during your break just for yourself—take a short walk, stand alone and think, be alone. Reflection encourages new learning.
- Do not stereotype people or their actions when you discuss the issues. Instead, use qualifying words. For example, use these words when appropriate: *few, some, sometimes, I’ve observed*. Do not use *most, all of the time*, or make stereotypical, generalized statements. When we describe the actions of others who differ from us, we will refrain from language that stereotypes others.
- Remember that each of us has lived a unique life. No one can ever know exactly what your experiences have felt like for you, and you can never know exactly what another person has experienced. Therefore, use only *I* messages and *do not* tell any other person what his or her experience has been. Don’t even tell another person that you know what he or she

is feeling. This can be especially offensive to a Person of Color if you are a White person who says, “I know exactly what you’re feeling.” I, as a member of the dominant group in the United States, can never really know what it is like to be a member of a nondominant group.

- Give this experience your best. Our society seldom provides a forum for us to speak frankly about the effects of race, class, culture, and gender upon one’s life experiences. Don’t be surprised if you feel uncomfortable during some of the discussion. Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton (2006) remind us that when discussing issues of race, we will feel uncomfortable and experience no closure. For many of us who want to “do” or “fix” things, this is unsettling; however, such discussions are about learning more of what we don’t know we don’t know, rather than fixing the situation.
- Respect each other’s privacy. Please do not share the personal comments made during your discussions outside the workshop or classroom.

By following these expectations, you will leave this experience with a new respect for the other participants and, hopefully, closer relationships with them.

**Generate additional behavior expectations for your interactions with your colleagues or your students.**

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## OUR CULTURAL LENS

If you picked up this book, you probably teach a culturally diverse group of children. This chapter offers you an opportunity to examine your cultural lens and reflect on how culture impacts our daily lives. Our culture is the lens through which we view the world. By better understanding our own cultural lens, we may better realize the importance of honoring the cultures of each student in our classrooms. In the following chapters, you will find numerous strategies that honor the culturally diverse cultures found in our schools.

We can’t deny that our children are changing in complexion and complexity, and you may find yearly more children in your classroom who don’t look like you or each other. As educators, we have more opportunities than ever to learn about each other and to share our cultural knowledge with our students.

In 2007, 44 percent of students were children from linguistic and culturally diverse backgrounds, with 10.8 million children coming from homes where a language other than English is spoken, with the majority of that being Spanish. In addition, 46 percent of all fourth-graders were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Planty et al., 2009a, 2009b, quoted in Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko, & Stuczynski, 2011). In 2008 the approximate number of long-term English learners (LT-ELs) was about 6 million, and in 2009 about 8 million (Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2011).

What does this mean for you? Are you equipped to teach children whose culture differs from your own? Professionals today must examine their own culture and its inherent values, consider the different cultures and values of their students and the students' families, and explore how to meet the needs of each student by acknowledging, respecting, and accommodating the culture and value system of the family (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Examining *our* culture is one place to begin.

Each of us views the world through a unique lens. Each lens is composed of a diverse spectrum that includes many facets of our lives. Think of it as a pair of glasses that allows you to see the world differently from every other person who inhabits it. Every person wears a lens that colors his or her own view. This individual way of looking at the world is our individual perspective through which we judge events and people around us. Our heredity, environment, and previous experiences comprise our worldview. In using this book to better understand our worldview, we have an opportunity to take an “inside-out” journey (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009, p. 3) that begins with the self and then travels outward through research, anecdotes, and personal stories of educators, culminating with chapters filled with how-to instructional strategies and lessons to reach and teach learners who may not look like you.

## WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is the totality of ideas, beliefs, values, activities, and knowledge of a group or individuals who share historical, geographical, religious, racial, linguistic, ethnic, or social traditions, and who transmit, reinforce, and modify those traditions. A culture is the total of everything an individual learns by growing up in a particular context and results in a set of expectations for appropriate behavior in seemingly similar contexts.

In their book *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders*, Lindsey, Nuri Robins, and Terrell (2003) define culture as “everything you do that enables you to identify with people who are like you and that distinguishes you from people who differ from you” (p. 41). They state that culture is about groupness because a culture is a “group of people identified by their shared history, values, and patterns of behavior” (p. 41). Culture provides us with a blueprint of the hidden rules of our group, a map for living that offers consistency and predictability in our everyday actions (Lindsey et al., 2003). These hidden rules are known as *cultural expectations*. Cultural expectations help us keep outsiders outside and insiders controlled (Lindsey et al., 2003), thereby sustaining our group culture.

As a White female, I belong to the majority of public school teachers in the United States, and I operate, often unaware, from an unofficial handbook of White Women's Hidden Rules that guide my behavior. Operating unconsciously by these hidden rules, or unspoken codes of conduct, I may assume my culturally diverse learners will know and understand them. In fact, I may expect them to adapt to my White female culture because it is the “air I breathe” in the public school classrooms where I teach. My culture is so familiar I do not recognize it as specific to my culture and assume others can adapt easily. This adaptation

is called *acculturation*, which is the process whereby the culture, values, and patterns of the majority are adopted by a person or an ethnic, social, religious affiliation, language, or national group. Acculturation is something I expect my students to do effortlessly and willingly when the process may be neither easy nor acceptable to them or to their peer culture. In effect, when I expect students to acculturate to my culture, I ask them to “leave their cultures at the door.”

## CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

Rather than expecting acculturation, Geneva Gay, in her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, & Practice* (2000), suggests developing culturally *responsive* teaching practices. In doing this, we incorporate teaching practices that respond to the cultures of the students in front of us. Gay states that the key anchors of culturally responsive teaching are its “simultaneous cultivation of the academic success and cultural identity of ethnically diverse students” (p. xiv). These features “serve as benchmarks for organization and assessing the quality of specific teaching ideas, programs, and actions” (p. xiv). When we cultivate academic success through high expectations, rigor, relevance, and relationships (Linton, 2011) while honoring the cultural identity of ethnically diverse students, we practice culturally responsive instruction.

### What do you know about culturally responsive teaching?

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### Consider the following anecdote and reflect below.

In a workshop on culture, an educator explained her practice of dealing with a diverse group of English language learners by saying that she tells her students to leave their cultures at the door when they walk into her classroom. Do you agree or disagree with this strategy?

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This educator fails to understand that she may be asking her students to leave their cultures at the door, but daily she walks in with hers and teaches them by and through White female cultural norms. In a class comprised of multiple ethnicities and cultures, she is missing out by not capitalizing on students’ *cultural capital*—that is, the strengths and experiences of her diverse students—and by not honoring their home cultures.

We cannot leave our cultures at the door, for our culture is the lens through which we see the world. It is not a veil or a family crest—these are manifestations of a culture. Our culture is the totality of our ideas, beliefs, values, knowledge, and behaviors. It is not something we can take on and off, even though some from culturally diverse groups have learned to be bicultural and “code-switch” as the situation requires. To code-switch means to assume the cultural norms or practice the hidden rules of a different culture in order to be more accepted by that culture. As a White female, I don’t think I can ever know what it means to code-switch daily; I don’t think I can ever understand the tremendous energy it must involve and how tiring it must be to live that way.

## HOW WERE YOU ACCULTURATED?

I was born and acculturated into a nuclear two-parent family that was White, middle class, small town, midwestern, Catholic, and conservative. These parameters formed the young adult lens I used to view the world.

**What was your young adult lens?**

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**Describe your culture today. Which parts of your young adult lens still describe you (several of mine have changed)?**

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## CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

We weave in and out of several kinds of cultures during our day. To become culturally proficient in each of these, we may need to widen our understanding of culture. Cultural proficiency is the “policies and practices of a school or the values and behaviors of an individual that enable the person or school to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment” (Lindsey et al., 2003, pp. xix–xx). It is an approach, not a theory, program, or silver bullet. This does not mean you must know everything there is to know about others. That is impossible. Rather, it means that “you have the self-awareness to recognize how you—because of your ethnicity, your culture, and your life experiences—may offend or otherwise affect others,” as well as what you offer to others (Nuri

Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2002, p. xii). Being culturally proficient allows you to use “teachable moments” to share yourself and learn from others (Nuri Robins et al., 2002, p. xii). We have learned much from the work of Nuri Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, and Terrell about cultural proficiency and are grateful to them for their groundbreaking work. Building on their work, we add the skill of becoming *culturally considerate* when relating to culturally diverse students, planning and delivering instruction, and creating culturally responsive environments for learning. Cultural consideration supports the inclusion of all aspects of culture while stemming from the basic principle of respect for each living human, celebrating and norming the differences among us.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Your school consists of several cultures. You work in an occupational culture and an organizational culture. Your occupational culture, if you are an educator, is education, and educators often share beliefs, dress, and language (jargon sometimes referred to as “educationese”), in addition to other factors.

Your organizational culture is your district and your school site. Even within your district, you will find school cultures that differ. Elementary, middle, and high school cultures differ. Each school differs from other schools in a district, yet they share some commonalities because they are in the same district. For example, the neighborhoods that surround the schools may be similar, influencing the schools’ culture, or they may vary economically, influencing the schools’ culture. If you teach in an elementary school, you may find more in common culturally with teachers who work in elementary schools in other districts than the teachers who teach at the high school in your district. In one district, teachers may work hours in their buildings at the end of the school day; in another district, teachers may be out the doors as soon as the buses leave (and sometimes before). There is a difference in the work culture between the two.

Think about a “hot beverage” culture. Does your faculty lounge offer coffee or tea to teachers? If so, do you pay for it? Who makes it daily? Which teachers drink it? Who cleans up the drink station? In visiting schools, a substitute may find a wide range of hot beverage cultures. In some schools, there is free coffee and tea, the staff drinks it, and someone is assigned to make the coffee and tea and clean up the area. In other schools, there is none. Between these two, there are schools where coffee and tea duties are rotated through the staff, the staff chips in to pay for the services, gourmet coffees and teas are available, staff is allowed to take the drinks into their classrooms, and so on. However, substitutes coming into the building need to know the hidden rules of the hot beverage culture at the school if they want to participate in the hot beverage culture. They may need their own cup or correct change to participate in the school ritual, and if they find themselves without a cup or cash, they may find no one willing to assist their acculturation into the school’s hot beverage culture. Cultural expectations function in much the same way. If we do not know the expectations (hidden rules or unspoken codes) of the cultural setting, we may find ourselves unable to participate in the culture.

## ETHNICITY, NATIONALITY, AND RACIAL IDENTITY

To many, culture refers to racial or ethnic differences. Ethnic culture results from our ancestral heritage and geography, common histories, and physical appearance (Lindsey et al., 2003). My ethnic culture is White American with ancestors who came from Western Europe. Dorothy, whose racial history is found in Chapter 3, is African American with ancestors who came from Africa and Western Europe. We share an American culture, but our lenses differ in that she views and lives her life as a Black person in this American culture, and I view and live my life as a White person in this American culture. This is our *racial identity*. Racial identity is how you perceive and name yourself racially. We share an identical *nationality*. Nationality means place of origin (Singleton, 2003). For many of us, our nationality is the United States.



Photo by Kim Anderson.

### **Bonnie**

Ethnic Culture: W. European

Racial Identity: White

Nationality: United States

### **Dorothy**

Ethnic Culture: African and W. European

Racial Identity: African American/Black

Nationality: United States

**What is your ethnic culture or ethnicity?**

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**What is your racial identity?**

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**What is your nationality?**

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**How do your ethnicity, racial identity, and nationality differ from your students and colleagues?**

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**Think about the way you view your world. What factors contribute to the lens you wear as you view the world?**

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## **CULTURAL FACTORS**

Below are several major factors that influence the way we see our world and contribute to the many cultures we weave in and out of each day:

- Family
- Gender
- Racial identity
- Ethnicity
- Nationality
- Age
- Sexual orientation
- Language
- Friends
- Religion
- School
- Geography
- Income of family or social class
- Political views
- Electronic media
- Social organizations
- Ableness
- Others

When we interact with our students or colleagues, we bring the baggage of our past experiences, our prejudices, and our preferences, as well as those of our families, and other factors that influence the lens through which we view the world. Those we face bring the same.

**Examine the list above. Which factors do you share with your students and colleagues? For example, your district may be composed largely of Protestants, and you are Protestant. Therefore, you share religion with your staff and students.**

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**In which ways do you differ from your students and colleagues?**

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The more differences you find, the more bridges you may need to build to reach those in your daily work life.

**What have you learned as a result of defining your culture?**

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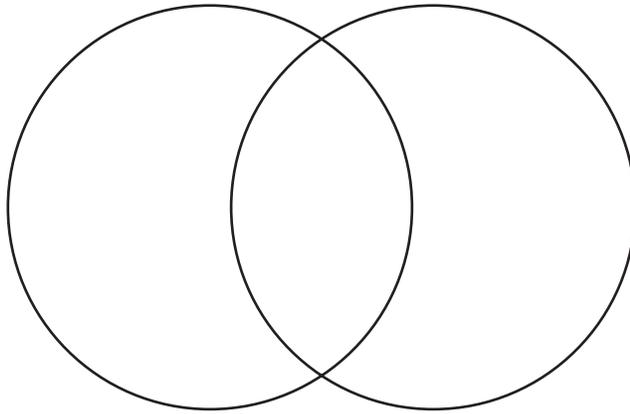
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One effective way to build bridges to cultures that differ from ours is to use a framework for when we interact with others. Using a framework focuses our thinking and gives us a blueprint for taking the journey of cultural awareness leading to action and change. We can embark on this journey to meet the needs of each student by acknowledging, respecting, and accommodating the culture and value system of the family (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002).

How do we do this? Even though there is no magic formula, the change can occur when we collaborate and work together with a common goal of supporting our students' personal and academic success. We begin this journey by learning about ourselves. A book study is one tool to do that. Professional development that examines issues of equity in your school is another. The exercise that follows might be used in a staff meeting or professional development opportunity as a tool to learn about other staff members. Each time we have used this activity with students and adults, the results have been overwhelmingly positive. The result always has been that any two individuals find that they have more commonalities than differences. This simple exercise underscores our humanity, makes each participant visible within the group, builds community, gets every voice into the air, and gives us feedback about our peers that is useful for future collaboration.

## SUGGESTED EXERCISE

- Pair off with another staff member.
- Use a Venn diagram.



- Write your name above one circle of the Venn diagram; your partner writes his or her name above the other.
- Fill out the Venn diagram with your similarities and differences. For example, if you are of different genders, your gender would go in the separate part of your own circle. If you share gender, your gender would be in the overlapping part of your circles. Fill in your Venn diagrams with as many aspects of your lives as time allows.
- Share with the larger group. You tell about your partner. Your partner tells about you. Share your similarities however you choose. Adults and students find creative ways to share during this exercise as it creates a community of learners.

## CULTURAL HOMOGENEITIES

If you are fortunate to have different cultural groups as part of your staff, check for cultural homogeneities. Cultural homogeneities are similarities that exist *within* cultural groups. For example, Deborah Tannen's (1990) work in communication styles finds that women's and men's communication styles differ because of gender. Each gender possesses its own culture.

You may find that your different cultural groups share cultural homogeneities about which you were unaware. Learning about the cultural homogeneities of other groups in our school setting increases our awareness of culture. Female appearance is one example of where you can observe cultural homogeneities. In some female cultural groups, long fingernails painted in elaborate patterns are the rage; in others, short, unpolished nails are the norm. Tattoos are a popular homogeneity of some groups. These are current fads or practices, but it is possible to find cultural homogeneities that span generations and demographic areas. During a diversity workshop, African Americans and an

Afro-Haitian (who said she learned the shared cultural homogeneities growing up in Haiti) found that they shared the cultural homogeneities of some terms unknown to the White participants. These terms included *my kitchen* for describing a place on their heads and *the hawk* for describing the wind, as well as others. Two books that offer specific information about cultural homogeneities of Blacks and Whites are the following:

- *It's the Little Things: Everyday Interactions That Anger, Annoy, and Divide the Races* by Lena Williams (2002), an African American who is a 25-year veteran of the *New York Times*.
- *Afraid of the Dark: What Whites and Blacks Need to Know About Each Other* by Jim Myers (2000), a White man married to a Black woman, who was the chief writer for a *USA Today* series on race.

If you plan to use these books in a book study with staff, consider using a facilitator skilled in cultural proficiency to lead the groups.

## WHAT STRATEGIES DO WE NEED TO LEARN?

What strategies do we need to use? When I do workshops, I ask educators participating in the workshop what they are most interested in learning about—the cultures of their students, how to build relationships across cultures, or instructional research-based strategies. Even when the workshop focuses on “students who don’t look like you,” invariably, educators tell me by a show of their hands that they most want to learn instructional research-based strategies. Why would teachers vote they most want to learn instructional research-based strategies when they are participating in a workshop focusing on student cultures?

### What do you think?

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Why *do* educators want to learn about strategies more than ways to build relationships across cultures and learn more about student cultures? Educators often want to learn “fix-it” strategies, yet the answers often are not found in simple fix-it strategies. Instead, the answers often lie elsewhere. After thinking about this for a long time, I had an “a-ha” one day. I came to the conclusion that learning about the cultures of our students and learning how to build relationships across cultures *are strategies!* If we learn strategies to build better relationships with students who don’t look like us, we are learning strategies to improve student engagement and support learning. Learning about the cultures of our students and learning how to build relationships across cultures

are strategies to support classroom instruction. This book includes all three: instructional strategies, strategies for understanding cultures, and strategies for building relationships across cultures.

The following is not a list of research-based instructional strategies (that comes later in the book); however, it is a small list of powerful strategies we can use to show respect and honor for our students' cultures. Our students are the future, and unless we can understand what respect means to them and show them that respect, we diminish our abilities as effective teachers supporting all students to achieve at high levels.

## HOW-TO STRATEGIES

Try the following strategies and don't forget to share them with your students.

**Level: Elementary/Middle/High School/Adult**

**Subject: Cross-curricular**

- Attend art events given by or about people of other cultures. Great art is found in every culture, and art is a great equalizer.
- Become friends with people of other cultures.
- Live in integrated neighborhoods.
- Enroll your children in integrated schools.
- Read the literature of other cultures.
- Build a culturally responsive learning climate in your classroom that respects diversity.
- Use language daily in your classroom that values diversity so that your students can begin to model your language. For example, talk about the important contributions of cultural groups, such as the contribution of the Africans to mathematics.
- Bring in newspapers and magazines of diverse cultures and have them out and available for students to peruse.
- Read newspaper articles to your class that foster positive portraits of diverse groups.
- Post simple phrases in multiple languages throughout your classroom and school.
- Post role models of diverse people throughout your school.
- Share the poetry of other cultures in your classroom. You could begin class by reading a poem by a culturally diverse poet. Before class, privately ask a student who shares that culture if he or she would like to read it to the class in his or her first language.
- Study a foreign language.
- Ask your students to write about their family customs and discuss them in your classes.
- Ask your students to do the Venn diagram exercise with members of the class.

- Ask your students to bring in a family dish to share on a special day.
- Don't privilege one culture above another. For example, privileging one group occurs when a teacher calls more often on one group of students, uses examples from the lives of one cultural group more than others, and so on. In the 1950s, in the culturally homogeneous elementary school classroom, we called these "teacher's pets."
- Respect the traditions of other cultures.
- Don't make assumptions about the rituals or practices of other cultures.
- Always ask yourself how you would feel if the cultural situation were reversed. For example, what if schools decided not to honor Christmas. How would you feel if you were Christian? How would you feel if you were Jewish or Muslim? What if nearly all members of our U.S. Senate were women? How would you feel? What if your entire central office administration were a different cultural group from yours? How would you feel? Often, we take for granted the cultural dominance of a group without thinking about how it might feel if a different cultural group held that domination.
- Travel, travel, travel—forgo the tours and travel so that you have the opportunity to meet and talk with the locals, wherever you go.

**Think about what you have read and reflected upon in this chapter. Write below what you consider most important.**

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This first chapter examined our personal lens in preparation for learning about and understanding the lenses of our students. Since each of us "sees" the world in a unique way, the more we can learn about the cultures of others, the more we can understand the reasons why our students make the choices they make and do the things they do in our classrooms. Chapter 2 offers you reflective questions to assess your current frame of mind as you continue looking inside yourself.



## SUGGESTED READINGS

- Gay, Geneva. *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, & Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).
- Nuri Robins, Kikanza J., Delores B. Lindsey, Randall B. Lindsey, and Raymond D. Terrell. *Culturally Proficient Instruction: A Guide for People Who Teach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2012).

Saifer, Steffen, Keisha Edwards, Debbie Ellis, Lena Ko, and Amy Stuczynski. *Culturally Responsive Standards-Based Teaching: Classroom to Community and Back* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2011).

Tileston, Donna Walker, & Darling, Sandra K. *Why Culture Counts: Teaching Children of Poverty* (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree, 2008).

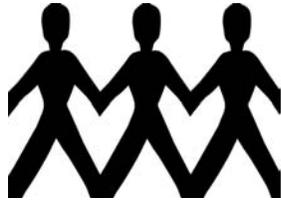
## **SUGGESTED WEB SITES**

African-American Experience and Issues of Race and Racism in U.S. Schools ([www.ithaca.edu/wise/race\\_african\\_american/](http://www.ithaca.edu/wise/race_african_american/))

Boston College ([www.bc.edu](http://www.bc.edu))

Teaching Tolerance ([www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org))

University of New Mexico College of Education ([coe.unm.edu](http://coe.unm.edu))



## 2

# Reflection Questions for Examining Our Inner Selves

**B**efore we begin to listen to and learn from others, consider the questions in this chapter. Here, you are invited to think about important questions in *your* professional and personal life. In *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, Parker Palmer (1998) asks this question about our inner selves: “How can the teacher’s selfhood become a legitimate topic in education and in our public dialogues on educational reform?” (p. 3). Our selfhoods must become legitimate dialogue if we wish to reach across cultures and support the academic excellence of our diverse learners. As Palmer says, “As long as we inhabit a universe made homogeneous by our refusal to admit otherness, we can maintain the illusion that we possess the truth about ourselves and the world—after all, there is no ‘other’ to challenge us!” (p. 38). However, when we open ourselves to the “other” and admit that they (the other) have different life experiences and perspectives, the “truths we have built our lives on begin to feel fragile” (p. 38). Ultimately, the more we know about ourselves and what truths we hold true, the more courage we may develop to be open to learning from others and the better we can reach and support our diverse learners.

### REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

What questions do you ask yourself as you reflect on your work? The following questions offer you an opportunity to reflect on basic things that make a difference in working with diverse learners: your heart, your body, and your interactions

with students and colleagues. These questions address the *who* of your teaching, a piece that is just as necessary, if not more so, than the *what, how, and why*.

- Do my students leave my classroom at the end of the school year liking more the subject I teach them than when they entered? For example, an English teacher would ask, “Do my students like to read and write more in June than they did in September?” Such a simple question, yet how many of us preassess and postassess to find out if we are truly building proficient readers and writers who enjoy using these skills?

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- What does my body language say to my students? Do I lean in to some children but lean away from others when I communicate with them? Is there incongruity between my body language and my spoken words? Do I understand the body language and social cues of each of the cultures represented in my classes? Some teachers have confessed they don’t even know which Asian cultural group one of their students belong to, therefore assuming all Asian cultures have the same cultural norms.

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- Do my interactions with my colleagues model the kinds of interactions I expect among my students? If not, how can I change my interactions with colleagues?

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- Do my interactions with my students model the kinds of behaviors I expect back from them? If I scream at them to sit down or scowl at them, can I expect to see the same behaviors mirrored back to me?

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- Do I know about the cultures of my students? If I were going to teach in France, I would learn about French customs, language, and so on, yet I may be teaching children from Bosnia and know nothing about their culture.

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- Do I read professional books in both my content area and areas of pedagogy and cultural awareness?

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- Do my school environment and my classroom reflect the kinds of achievement I expect from my students? Do I post images of diverse role models, in addition to sports and entertainment figures, clearly in view for my students? What are the subconscious and hidden messages we send students when they do not see people who look like them portrayed in their place of learning? Try this at your school. How many steps must you walk into your school before you see a picture posted of a culturally diverse person? Does it matter? A local university has an office where more than ten White men's pictures hang on the wall with no pictures of women or culturally diverse individuals. The assistant in the office, a culturally diverse middle-aged woman, shared how working under their stares each day saps her energy. Ask yourself this question again, after you read the story of Dorothy, an educator and administrator, in the next chapter: Does it matter?

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- Do I love my subject content? Am I a voracious reader? Do I regularly cut out articles from journals, newspapers, and magazines about my subject matter to share with my students? Do I connect my content to the lives of my students?

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- Do I have a deep and broad understanding of my subject content? Do I make my subject matter explicit? Do I talk about how I learn and what I must do to learn?

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- Do I use the CCSS for standards-based instruction? Do I use research-based instructional strategies to support learners in my classroom?

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- Do I practice my subject content? If I teach literacy or English, am I a writer and reader? If I teach physical education, do I keep myself physically healthy and fit? Students pay attention to what I *do*, not what I say, so do I practice what I preach?

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- Do I take care of myself? Do I eat healthily, exercise, and care for my mental, physical, and spiritual self? If I don't, how can I expect to be the best teacher I can be for my students?

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Consider using the above prompts for your personal or professional journal. You may want to select one a week to address in your journal as you journey through your school year. You may want to begin your department meetings with one set of questions and discuss them in the group for the first fifteen minutes of the meeting. You may want to use these at the onset of each book study meeting in your professional learning community. Using these prompts, you may find common ground with colleagues as you work together to examine your inner worlds. As the year progresses, we experience periods of fatigue

and stress, perhaps even burnout. In Chapter 18, you will find suggestions for combating these. Be good to yourself, take time for yourself, and choose what fits your needs.

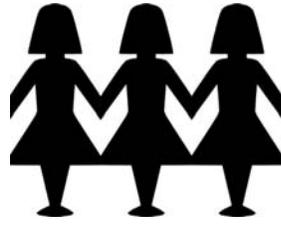
We each know thousands of people and have listened to countless life stories. What have you learned from the stories of others? In the next chapter, we focus on the racial histories of three women: Dorothy, who is African American; Brenda, a Latina; and Bonnie, who is White. We read these so we can expand our understanding of racial life experiences even as we understand that these three women do not represent all women in each of their racial groups. At the same time, learning about the racial experiences of others gives us the opportunity to reflect upon our own racial experiences and how they affect our cultural lens as we teach students who don't look like us. So it's still all about you—looking inside yourself!



## **SUGGESTED READING**

Parker, Palmer. *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).





# 3

## **Exploring Our Racial Identity Through Our Racial History**

**I**n the first two chapters, you examined your cultural lens and answered questions about your practice and interactions with your colleagues and students. Those chapters prepared you to continue our journey and delve deeper into the impact of race on our students' lives and on our own lives. In this chapter, we explore our racial identity through our racial histories. In order to understand ourselves more deeply and, I submit, to bridge better the cultural gap between culturally diverse learners and ourselves (if you are a White teacher), we must explore our racial identity. When we read the racial histories of others and share our own in writing and conversation, we expose ourselves. As we share with others who don't look like us, we learn that their experiences, though similar in many ways, also differ in many ways. This chapter offers us the opportunity to reflect on the impact of one's racial history on student achievement.

We educators are good people. We work really hard, and our focus is on the children we teach. As a White teacher, I want to believe that I treat all students the same. Yet my students do not all come to me with the same needs and experiences; students who don't look like me come with different racial experiences, experiences that I can never truly understand. However, if I look inside and examine my own racial identity, I can better equip myself with strategies to meet the needs of students who face different experiences.

We live in a racialized society, and race impacts us 100 percent of the time, no matter our color, according to Singleton and Linton (2006) in *Courageous*

*Conversations About Race.* One way to understand better how race affects us is to write our racial histories and share and compare them with others, especially those who differ from ourselves. It is not easy to talk about race. As White educators, we may be worried about being perceived as or being called a racist. In my experience, this is a real fear. Yet, when I accepted that I had been socialized in a society that is racialized, it became far easier for me to accept that I may have racist thoughts. My challenge is to ensure I do not act out on those thoughts. Do they come to my mind? Of course. But I try not to act out on them and not to judge others based on the color of their skin.

Following are three racial histories. In no way, however, are these representative of whole groups or cultures. Instead, they are the individual histories of three women, one who is the author of this book, one who is her close friend, and one who is the mother of her only grandchild. By sharing our histories with each other, we learned more about how our past experiences often dictate our motivations, reactions to incidents, and the decisions we make in our daily lives. We also found that our histories sparked conversations between us about the impact of race in our lives.

The first is my racial history. I concentrate on events in my life that deal specifically with racial issues. The second is Dorothy's racial history. We have been close friends since 1983, but it was not until I read her racial history that I learned of many of the childhood (and, I might add, horrific) incidents she experienced that I was spared simply because I am White. Our skin color barely differs, since I am an olive-skinned White person and she is a light-skinned African American person. Yet in this racialized society in which we live, our life experiences have differed greatly and continue to differ today simply because she is Black and I am White. The third racial history is Brenda's. Brenda is a young Latina who works in education at the national level. She brings young, newer eyes to the conversation, yet her racial history is still filled with discrimination even though she was born thirty years after I was.

The prompts following our racial histories offer you an opportunity to examine your own racial identity. By exploring our racial identity and personal experiences related to race, perhaps we can understand better the challenges of race our diverse Learners of Color confront in their lives.

My story may be typical of other small-town White women who experienced childhood in the 1950s, went to college in the 1960s, and began teaching during a time of great unrest in our country. These women may have been active in the civil rights movement or the women's movement, or perhaps they were spectators to these events, yet deeply involved with teaching the children who would enter this changing world. Not until the 1980s did I begin to realize how these prior years shaped my thinking and my need to understand the world from more than the myopic lens of my past. In no way do I believe that I understand all perspectives; in fact, the more I learn, the more I understand that the "I don't know what I don't know" continues to expand rather than diminish in my life.

Histories are important. Recently I shared with two young women teachers that we women teachers were not allowed to wear pants to work when I began teaching in 1967. It was not until 1971 that we were allowed to wear a pantsuit,

which meant pants with a top that covered our bottoms. Also, we could not get a credit card or purchase a house in our name alone. These women were stunned and stared in disbelief, yet they looked like me, White women in the United States. When we don't know our histories and the barriers faced in the past (and in the present), we limit our ability to reach and teach others.

## **MY STORY**

### **Childhood**

I was born a White female in 1946 to middle-class parents in a small town on the Mississippi River. My young world was divided into the cultural groups of Catholics and non-Catholics, with Catholicism being the normative value and all else being the “non” or “other” in my experience.

When I was in eighth grade, a Black male joined our class during the basketball season. One night after a victory, the coach took the team and the class supporters to the Southern Café. When they would not serve our star player, the coach stood up and marched us out the door. This experience was my first recognized encounter with discrimination, and I recall being upset and my mother reflecting my feelings.

### **Adulthood**

During college I married my first husband, and while planning our wedding, I observed racial discrimination for the second time. I had made friends with a Black girl from St. Louis and wanted to invite her to my wedding. My mother objected, saying my grandmother would not enter the church with a Negro inside. This was my first awareness of discrimination in my family, since I had never heard my parents make a negative comment about race.

Soon I entered graduate school at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi. There I mixed with many Blacks on the streets, and even now I remember the signs at the ice cream drive-in that said “Colored only” and the two separate waiting rooms at the dentist's office, one carpeted with nice chairs for White patients, the other bare floored with beat-up furniture for Black patients. Even though Black students were allowed to register for classes in 1967, I did not have a single Black person in any of my graduate classes over the period of five summers. That same year, I entered teaching and taught in a junior high school in the suburbs of St. Louis. The school was all White, and the haves and the have-nots consisted of those who lived a middle-class existence and those who eked out an existence on the banks of the small river that ran through the area. They were referred to by some staff and students as the “river rats.”

I lived in the White suburbs of St. Louis for the next several years, returning to Ole Miss each summer. My daughter was born in Oxford, Mississippi, the same week that the first man walked on the moon. She entered her parents' world where our church was White, our schools were White, our neighborhoods were White, and our lives were White.

### *Another Culture*

It was not until after a divorce in 1975 that I entered another world. On my thirtieth birthday, I met the man who would become my second husband. When I wrote my mother that I was dating a man and that, “by the way, he is Black,” she wrote me a letter telling me I had ruined my father’s fifty-sixth birthday with this news. Perhaps naively, I was shocked at my parents’ response. I really hadn’t thought that they were prejudiced. By this time, my grandmother had died, and I thought their reservation had disappeared with her death. I married my second husband in secret, and he was not welcome in my parents’ house until after the birth of our son. I faced, with the birth of my son, experiences I would have never known in my all-White world. In the hospital, the nurse marked “Caucasian” on my son’s hospital information without asking. Weeks later, as I changed his diaper in a department store bathroom, a Black woman noticed the black and blue spot at the base of his spine, and like a fortune-teller foretelling his future, she whispered ominously, “He must be biracial because he has the ‘mark.’” The mark disappeared, kinky hair replaced my son’s straight birth hair, and his skin darkened as he grew. I was now the mother of a Child of Color in my White world.

### *The Voluntary Desegregation Program*

In 1984 the St. Louis Voluntary Desegregation Program brought Black children to the school where I taught, a suburban high school that had previously held only White students. Partway through the year, a science teacher brought a girl to me and asked if I would proofread a letter she had written to the school board. I read her letter and wept. She wrote that the Black children bused daily to our high school were largely ignored—invisible. The words of novelist Ralph Ellison (1952), author of *Invisible Man*, echoed in my head as I thought about the cloak of invisibility African Americans often experience in our society.

After reading the letter, I knew we had to do something at our school to support our Black students. We started a multicultural club, the Organization for the Appreciation of Black Culture, and invited all students and teachers to join. For the next five years, this club offered the “transfer” students, as they were often called, a place to discuss issues and network with others.

### **My Journey Continues**

I began to study in earnest a world that I didn’t know I didn’t know. Luckily, I found mentors, both Black and White, who gave me books to read, offered me opportunities, such as studying with James Banks in Seattle, and traveling to Africa to study the impact of African literature on African American literature. Traveling to Africa, I found yet another world.

The next decade brought professional change as I completed a PhD in English, focusing on the impact of race and gender in the literary canon; moved from teaching to professional development; changed districts; and eventually accepted a position with a local service center at the University of Missouri. For the past four decades, I have had the good fortune to work with educators in schools at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

My children grew to adulthood, forever influenced by the effects of racism in our society, yet often protected from its insidiousness by their family and our middle-class stature. Their stories must come from them in *The Biracial and Multiracial Student Experience* (Davis, 2009, pp. 3–7).

For nearly thirty years, I have read and studied racism. Yet I continue to make mistakes, take my White privilege for granted, and do the “White talk” Alice McIntyre (1997) refers to in *Making Meaning of Whiteness* even when it limits others’ opportunities. This journey is lifelong; however, I am fortunate to have allies along the way.

One of these is my close friend, Dorothy Kelly, who through her friendship, stories, and writings continues to provide me with opportunities to listen to one who views the world through another lens.



## DOROTHY’S STORY

### Childhood

I was born in 1957 in a small town in mid-Missouri. I attended public schools, K–12, and most of my role models before adolescence were older people. I lived in a rural African American community, so I can be classified as what some African Americans call “country.” I lived there with my maternal grandparents during my early childhood. After leaving the country, I lived with my paternal grandmother and spent most of my childhood between two mid-Missouri towns. Although segregation was the law in my early years, by virtue of the size of both towns, we always lived in close proximity to White people. As a child I knew and understood that White people were in charge of everything outside of my home, but I was also taught that White people were not better than Black people.

My first lesson in understanding what being an African American meant was taught by my grandmother. She drove to the poor White section of town to show me impoverished White people, and she told me not to be ashamed of being a Negro, because White people had a hard time in this world too. She told me that no one was any better than anyone else, but you had to work hard in school because some White people would keep Negroes from making a good living. I learned most of life’s lessons from my grandmother.

Outside of my home life, I was encouraged by other strong Black women and men to be an independent thinker. My neighbor across the street, who was the secretary of our local NAACP and the mother of one of my friends, used to send me and her daughter to the local Rexall drugstore every Saturday to sit at the counter to order milk shakes or cherry sodas. At that time I didn’t know that we were being sent there as an act of civil disobedience. We were instructed to sit there until we were served and report back everything that was said to or about us. Luckily, we were served with no incidents. This was in the mid-1960s when I was in first through third grades.

One of the more fun times of my childhood was playing softball. One of the White community members started a girls' softball team. Everyone, Black and White, thought he was very brave, because he recruited mostly Black girls to play on his team. A few White girls joined, but the majority of the players were Black. We ranged in age from ten to sixteen years old. Our club sponsor was the local Dairy Queen. We traveled to small local towns and communities to play, and we won most of our games. Sometimes we could not play in the towns after dark or had to leave right after the game ended. Rarely were we allowed to even get drinks at the water fountains. Sometimes we would purposely go to the fountains when the coach told us that we were not allowed. One summer we won the league championship. We had been warned that we would be run out of town if we won. As soon as the game was over, we got out of town. It was a very scary and fun time for us, and we laughed about the situation, but the older girls were ready to fight if we had to defend ourselves. Interestingly, our parents did not go to the out-of-town games; it was just us and the coach. He was the bravest White man of my childhood.

My elementary school officially integrated—that is so much the wrong word—officially desegregated when I was in the fifth grade. We had to walk across town to a school that housed the fifth and sixth grades from the entire town in order to comply with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. The local high school had been desegregated since the early 1960s. When we walked through the White neighborhoods, all the White residents came out and stood along the roads as the Black kids walked to the newly “integrated” school. We were scared and embarrassed because they thought we were going to do something to them or their property. Eventually, they stopped coming out, and we walked to and from school without incident.

My first real understanding of being racially desegregated came at this school. I had been with most of these students in one classroom for five years; we simply moved together to the next grade. But now my class was separated. We had never known that kind of separation, but it was very clear where you stood in society after the implementation of court-ordered integration.

I still have flashbacks of racially charged incidents during my childhood. Racial slurs and being banned from playing with White students was pretty much an everyday activity. There were times of civic unrest when a Black girl was selected homecoming queen or band majorette, and the Black community members were worried about violence at the high school because, invariably, the White students and parents would become angry. I also remember when one of those young ladies was the first Black person hired by a local financial company as a clerk. The local NAACP and a united group of church elders had many meetings before those kinds of employment decisions were finalized. There were many “first” Blacks, and there was always backlash from each hiring or selection.

### **Adolescence**

As I entered junior high, I encountered what it was like to be the “first one” or the “only one.” My junior high years spanned Grades 7 to 9. I was the first

African American cheerleader at my junior high school. Because the Black girls knew there would be only one Black chosen, the predicament made us act mean toward one another. After being selected, I was very excited and happy, but that soon ended, and the reality of being the first Black cheerleader at my junior high consumed me. It was extremely odd always being on the outside of the White cheerleader clique. When we were making decisions about uniforms, hairstyles, or cheering stunts, they would whisper among themselves to agree on who would try to explain to me how to be a cheerleader. I felt odd and they felt odd. I was almost relieved when I became ill and had to have surgery and couldn't be a cheerleader. Once again, I was on the outside looking in as the rest of the Black girls again became competitive and divisive as they vied for that one spot. Some girls argued over who would be the best person to take my place, while others made bets on who might get selected even though they were not good at cheering. Some of the White parents and their daughters became outraged because only Black girls could try out as my replacement—that's desegregation. I was glad to be through with the whole mess.

In my second year in junior high, I was the first Black student council member, which was an exciting time for me because I felt like I was able to make a difference and I wasn't selected because of my race. I got to see the kids in my social studies class hold their hands up, both Black and White, and I knew I was legitimately voted in because the kids wanted me.

I felt a sense of independence; it was a racially uplifting time—my early adolescence. But as I entered my high school years, I moved to a neighboring larger university town. Although I knew my relatives who lived there, this town presented my mid-adolescence with a host of new friends, and acceptance was tenuous. Perhaps because I was considered a nice, friendly young lady and easy to talk to, I made friends with White students. Along with these friendships came a price. The price was being exposed to their racial history. I had a really cool White girlfriend, who had a Volkswagen, and we would hang out together. One day we were getting into her car and a good White friend of mine made this remark: "I don't ride nigger." (This was a local expression sometimes voiced by a White person who did not want to ride in the back seat.) She immediately apologized. I told her I don't consider myself to be a nigger. We got through it, and we are still friends. Once, with another group of friends at a park, we observed a Black family having a reunion. A girl in our group burst out laughing and said, "Hey, there's a coon reunion!" Whenever I heard *nigger* or *coon*, I didn't hesitate to remind my White friends that I didn't put up with that talk and they shouldn't use it around me.

One of my high school sweethearts was a White guy, and he found himself often berated and called "nigger lover" by some of the White boys. My boyfriend lost some White friends along the way, and he also kicked butts because he would get so upset at racism. However, just like many other adolescents in the 1970s, we saw ourselves as righting the world and being together because we wanted to be together, not because we were a Black and White couple. We selected our friends based on how they treated us, not because of race.

I still resent how I was treated by my high school counselor—I believe that to him I really did not matter. Prior to leaving high school, everyone met the high school counselor, whom we looked to for guidance on how to go to college. It never occurred to me that I wouldn't go to college. I was excluded from the Upward Bound program that most Black students participated in at my high school. The program was designed to acclimate Black high school juniors and seniors to college life. I still don't know why I was excluded from the program other than the fact that we did not receive social aid from the government or live in government housing.

My guidance counselor did not give me any encouragement, ideas, or suggestions about going to college. So, as a result, I had no idea that you could get financial aid, what college would cost, or how one got into college. I walked to the local university and found the office of admissions. The receptionist told me what I had to do in order to get into college. By the end of my summer, I had taken and passed the ACT, then began classes in the fall. Without any guidance, I selected the wrong classes and did not have a good experience in my freshman year.

### **Adulthood**

As I entered college in the late 1970s, my world expanded to encounter other People of Color from all over the world. I had come to experience the world from a multicultural perspective. I spent a lot of time with foreign students and learned about their lives and how they were affected by race and racism. I majored in history and eventually decided to become a teacher because I wanted all students to feel that they were special. I believed that I could help my students to understand the world and accept others and not practice prejudice, discrimination, or racism. I also believed that their understanding of the world would come from learning about everyone's history. It wasn't until my early 30s that I began to understand that matters of race and racism were paramount to understanding how people relate to others in their families, in their communities, and even worldwide. I also believe that until this idea is truly explored, we educators will continue to perpetuate racism and misunderstand issues of race.



**Dorothy states that until matters of race are “truly explored, we educators will continue to perpetuate racism and misunderstand issues of race.” In what ways do you agree or disagree?**

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Next, Brenda shares her racial history.

## BRENDA'S STORY

I'm the product of a Mexican mama and a Puerto Rican papa. I like to say I'm Mexi-Rican or a Borimex. I always thought that since I was made up of two ethnic groups I would be in a position of large-scale acceptance amongst my people. However, when coming of age, this combination proved to be damaging to my self-perception.

My parents separated when my mama was two months pregnant with me. As a result, I grew up listening to her talk about how Puerto Ricans aren't nice people, how I should never bring a Puerto Rican kid to the house and, more importantly, I shouldn't tell people I'm Puerto Rican. My mama wasn't the only one who told me to stop telling folks I was Puerto Rican, but my brother as well. One day, my brother heard me tell a group of neighborhood White kids that I was Puerto Rican. He immediately called me into the house. As soon as I walked in, he grabbed me by the shoulders and with tears in his eyes said: "Don't be telling people we're Puerto Rican! Don't you know White people don't like Puerto Ricans?!" As a little brown girl I never realized that other brown people belonged to other ethnic/racial groups.

Negative comments about being Puerto Rican were not just in my home, but in the playground as well. At school, Mexican kids had no qualms about calling me a spic. In fact, one day, a White kid called my girlfriend a spic. Her response to him was "I ain't no spic. I'm not Puerto Rican." She then went on to explain to me that Puerto Ricans are spics and Mexicans are wetbacks. I remained silent.

I carried this silence with me for years. Instead of telling people to go to hell, I accepted their word as truth. I began to loathe the very idea of my Puerto Rican blood. I felt wrong. I felt negative. Soon enough, I stopped telling people I was Puerto Rican. Puerto Rican kids weren't as offensive. They were just less inclusive because I didn't speak like them, I didn't live in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood or I didn't "look" Puerto Rican.

During my junior high and high school years I stifled my voice because I didn't know where I belonged. However, I eventually rediscovered myself during my late college years. I exposed myself to not just Puerto Rican culture, but to all cultures. The more I stepped outside of my comfort zone, the more I was able to close the gap of my identity crisis. I eventually capped my insecurities after a trip to the island where I met my papa. After 24 years, the mystery of who and what made me was sealed the instant I set my eyes on his face.

I now look at the whopping eyes of my five-month-old daughter, Eva Salomé Álvarez Davis. She is Mexican; she is Puerto Rican; she is White; and she is Black. Yet, when I look at her, I don't see any of this. All I see is a little girl who has the potential to enjoy life and to develop her own thoughts; I see a little girl who will be confident in her skin regardless of ethnic and racial backgrounds; and I see a little girl who will benefit from being multicultural and who will cross all boundaries despite color and language.

I'm excited to be her mama. (Davis, 2009, pp. 8-9)



**We three women experience life in different yet similar ways. What differences and what similarities did you find in our histories?**

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As you work with students who don't look like you, consider their racial narratives. How can you learn more about their life experiences? Below is a list of how-to strategies for meeting that need.

## HOW-TO STRATEGIES

- Have your students write about themselves and share in class.
- Have your students create self-portraits and display them in the class.
- Ask your students to bring in photographs of themselves and their families to display in the classroom on a “family wall.”
- Ask students to write an oral history in English and social studies classes.
- Post family pictures on a school Web page (when appropriate).
- Highlight a family of the week in your classroom.
- Share family histories as a way to build community in your classroom.
- Read biographies of people who do not share your racial identity.
- Read histories of groups who do not share your racial identity.
- Stay abreast of current racial issues in newspapers. Read opposing viewpoints of the controversial cases centered on race and consider the different perspectives.
- Write your racial past. Write a history that includes the interactions that you have had with people of a different color from yourself. You may choose to draw a time line rather than write your racial history.
- Share your racial history.

In your professional learning group or with the entire staff:

1. Divide into smaller groups of four or five colleagues.
2. Find a comfortable space with no table or obstruction between any of the group and sit in a circle facing each other.
3. Decide upon a timekeeper.
4. Discuss protocols: the speaker has four minutes of uninterrupted speaking time; no questions at the end of each individual's sharing; listeners offer positive body language and good listening skills, such as looking the speaker in the eyes and affirmatively nodding the head.
5. Begin with one colleague (perhaps the person whose first or last name is closest to the end of the alphabet).

6. Speak for four minutes about your racial history, either reading what you wrote or just saying what you feel.
7. Go directly to the next person when the four minutes ends, and if the speaker finishes before the time is up, stay silent in the group (this is the hardest part of the exercise).
8. Finish all sharing and then give your group time to share openly with each other with any comments or questions they may have.
  - Discuss racial histories with others.
  - Hold courageous conversations about race with your professional learning group and a trained facilitator.

**What compelling similarities and differences do you find in your racial history and the racial histories of others? What other power dynamics, such as those related to ethnicity, class, and gender, were shared in the group? Considering all that was shared, what have you learned as a result of your participation in this exercise?**

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## **THE ONGOING JOURNEY**

Having close friends who possess different racial pasts helps me understand better my own myopic view. Each day I learn something new; often I am embarrassed by my ignorance; seldom do I feel smug. Usually I feel humbled and wish knowledge didn't hurt so much. Even assuming I can understand the life experiences of People of Color illustrates my thought processes of privilege. Of course, I can't understand, but I am more willing to listen and, hopefully, honor our differing experiences.

**Reflect on your “fatigue level” upon completing this chapter. Do you find it tiring to think about your racial past and others’ racial identities?**

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If you are White, have you considered how tiring it must be to have to deal with your racial identity all the time? Even though we each are affected by our race 100 percent of the time (Singleton & Linton, 2006), I can choose to walk away from it and not have to think about it as I move about in our White-dominated society until I encounter a Person of Color.



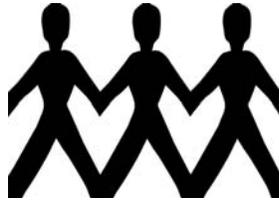
## SUGGESTED READINGS

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# 4

## What Is Race?

**I**n the previous chapter, we shared our racial histories and strategies for learning the histories of our students' families. With our histories as a basis for understanding the racial lens through which we see the world, we can move on to an examination of race.

What is race? This question has haunted me for decades. Even though I used to identify people as fitting into different races, I never understood exactly why or how. I always wanted to better understand exactly what race is and how the concept of race evolved. Originally, I thought it had only to do with physical appearance. Not until I began to study the phenomenon of race did I learn about the anthropological, economic, and political aspects of race. The concept of race is so complicated, and I continue to search for better definitions and more understanding.

**What is your understanding of race?**

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Originally, I thought of race as a simple classification system that put humans into distinct categories based mostly on their skin color and a few other physical features. In geography class in elementary school, I learned about the races of the world. But as I grew older, simple observation about skin color caused me to realize that it could not be a determiner of race since skin color varies tremendously within every racial designation. And certainly, when I have a tan, my skin color is darker than many people who self-identify or are identified by others as being People of Color. So if it is not skin color, I wondered if there were another physical feature that is distinctive to a race. The answer is no. There is no distinctive characteristic that defines one as belonging to a certain race.

## THEN WHAT IS RACE?

People hold varied beliefs about the definition of race. Some believe race is a biological reality attached to a variety of physical features (phenotypes). Others believe race is the socially constructed meaning attached to a variety of physical features (phenotypes). Still others say race does not exist at all but is rather the *belief* in either of these.

**Are any of these correct? What do you think?**

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The American Anthropological Association (AAA) has been studying race for some time, and it issued a statement on race in the 1990s to help clarify erroneous definitions.

### **American Anthropological Association's Statement on Race**

The AAA's *Statement on "Race"* (1998) says that "we have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences" (p. 8). However, this is simply not true. Due to the scientific expansion of the 20th century, it has "become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups" (p. 2). So the AAA says that there are *no* distinct biological groups we can define as races.

**Do you agree or not? Explain.**

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### **Phenotypes**

How does the AAA know there is no such thing as distinct biological groups we can define as races? The AAA says it knows this because physical traits—such as hair texture, skin color, and physical features—are inherited independently. These physical traits are known as *phenotypes*. Phenotypes are the visible characteristics of an organism resulting from the interaction between its genetic makeup and the environment.

Interestingly, one trait does not predict the presence of others. Dark skin may be associated with kinky hair or wavy or straight hair. All of these combinations

are found among indigenous people in tropical areas (AAA, 1998). Since phenotypes are inherited independently, they can't be bound together to be indicators of distinct groups of people, known as racial categories. Yet they are bound together when used for *racial profiling*. Racial profiling, the practice of categorizing individuals based on phenotypes associated with particular racial categories, continues today even with scientific evidence to the contrary. For example, racial profiling occurs when we target persons who *appear* to be members of the same race. Remember how persons who looked Middle Eastern to some people may have been profiled as terrorists following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. And more recently, in the 2012 case of Trayvon Martin, he was racially profiled based on his skin color and what he was wearing—a hoodie.

### **Lack of Physical, Scientific Basis**

In *Philosophy of Science and Race*, Professor Naomi Zack (2002) underscores the lack of evidence for the existence of race. She states, "Differences in skin tone are gradual, not discrete; and blood-type variations occur independently of the more visible phenotypes associated with race, such as skin color and hair texture" (p. 88). There are not different blood types associated with different races. The same blood types run through all our veins, no matter our racial categories. Furthermore, Zack states that "essences, geography, phenotypes, genotypes, and genealogy are the only known candidates for physical scientific bases of race. Each fails. Therefore, there is no physical, scientific basis for the social racial taxonomy" (p. 88).

### **All Humans Are One Species**

If there are no distinct biological groups we can define as races, then what are we? The AAA states that we are truly a *human race*, not distinct races. So there are no biological races. We all belong to the same species with innumerable variations in genetics, including phenotypes. The AAA says we have continued to share genetic material that has maintained all of humankind as a single species, not distinct races. In the late twentieth century, the human genome project revealed that humans can't be biologically classified into races. *Newsweek's* December 4, 1995, issue explored the topic thoroughly. PBS has a three-part series that can be previewed at [www.pbs.org/race/](http://www.pbs.org/race/).

Educator and former high school advanced placement social studies teacher Donna Beard puts it this way: "To my granddaughter and all other humans, I say welcome to the 21st Century. Embrace it. Get to know yourself; reject the category of race as a way of defining who you are. Know that life is difficult for all us humans. Enjoy the many good days ahead of you that you will have when you are in control of who you are" (Davis, 2009, p. 17).

Learning this was a huge *a-ha* for me. I assumed that brown and black people, because of their skin color, belonged to a different race than I, a white person, belonged to, but I now know we all belong to a single race: the human race.

**Reflect on this information. What are your thoughts?**

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## **HOW DID THE CONCEPT OF RACE EVOLVE?**

If we agree with Donna Beard, then how did the concept evolve? Race evolved as a mode of classification linked to colonization that was used to rationalize attitudes and treatment by those in power (AAA, 1998, p. 4) and for economic power. In the United States, leaders among the European Americans linked “superior traits with Europeans and negative and inferior ones to blacks and Indians” (p. 4), thereby institutionalizing and deeply embedding these beliefs in the American psyche. There was a need for the belief in race, for how else could we enslave fellow human beings? If we believed they belonged to an inferior race, it justified the treatment. Unfortunately, we still see the beliefs in and assumptions about race played out on our national scene and in our neighborhoods, schools, and families.

## **MULTIRACIAL INDIVIDUALS**

An additional assumption about race may occur when human beings, who identify as belonging to different races, have children who identify as biracial, multiracial, or mixed. If biological race is not a reality, then their children are not biologically mixed race, but race is still real for them. They may self-identify and be seen by others as biracial, multiracial, or mixed, or they may choose a monoracial self-identity such as Black American. In our society, these individuals have the freedom to self-identify and choose their “racial” category on the Census. It is important for educators to recognize this group, for this population is large and growing, especially among school-age children. In the 2000 Census, 6.8 million people, 2.4 percent of the U.S. population, reported more than one race (Jones & Smith, 2001, p. 4). The self-designated multiracial population is diverse and young. About 42 percent, or 2.9 million, were under eighteen years of age, with nearly 70 percent of all multiracial people being younger than thirty-five years of age and only 5 percent of the multiracial population reporting being sixty-five or older. About 25 percent of the population who reporting one race was less than eighteen, and 12 percent of the population reporting one race was over age sixty-five (p. 5). Clearly, more younger people than older people are self-designating multiracial identities. The 2000 Census was a historical census in self-reporting, and it was followed by a historical election in which a man with a mixed-race heritage was elected president of the United States (Davis, 2009, pp. 88–89).

Multiracial students often hunger to find others who share their experiences, just as the rest of us seek those who share our experiences. At a hotel where I have stayed for the past three years doing work in a nearby school district, there is a desk clerk who is a young, biracial woman who shared with me how hard it is to work there with no one else who is mixed like her. After our conversation, I gave her my book, *The Biracial and Multiracial Student Experience: A Journey to Racial Literacy*, and she began showing it to the other desk clerks. To her surprise, one of them was biracial, and the two young women were delighted to learn this and communicate about their racial experiences. Our multiracial students need opportunities to talk about their experiences, just as other Students of Color. If you want to learn more about students who experience life as biracial and multiracial learners, read *The Biracial and Multiracial Student Experience* (2009). It includes more than forty narratives, nearly all written by teachers and students, and they give us a personal and poignant glimpse into the experiences of race these individuals encounter.

## CULTURAL BEHAVIORS

If there is scientific proof that race does not exist, why do we still treat others based on our perceptions of what race they identify with? Well, as the concept of race evolved as a worldview, behaviors were attributed to different groups and culture was implied to be genetically inherited. What we might label as *race* is really cultural behavior. So the judgments we often make about others that we attribute to race are really cultural behaviors. Their cultural behaviors are being misdefined as racial behaviors. Race is implying biological designation, and culture is something else. Cultural behaviors are learned, and “it is a basic tenet of anthropological knowledge that all normal human beings have the capacity to learn any cultural behavior” (AAA, 1998, p. 7). We learn the cultural behaviors of the groups in which we were socialized.

**Think about cultural behaviors that you learned as a child. Write about them.**

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I learned the cultural behaviors of Catholicism as a child, and I mastered the practice of being a Catholic. If all Catholics had green hair, would I have been classified as belonging to a race of Catholics? Yet, this happens with race.

Mali, a young man whose mother is of Mexican heritage and whose father is African American, shares that he is often told, “You don’t act Black” or “You

don't act Mexican." He understands that his peers are referring to cultural behaviors, not racial designations, but it irritates him when others assume he should act a certain way because of his skin color.

While teaching, I found that I had to fight not to assign racial labels to cultural behaviors. Students from different cultural groups may behave differently than students from other cultural groups. Yet it is so easy to group students based on skin color rather than culture, too often forgetting that Students of Color come to our classrooms from hundreds of different cultures, not as homogeneous races.

**Have you assigned racial labels to cultural behaviors? Is there something you might do because you "don't know you don't know"? Reflect below.**

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## **CULTURE OR RACE?**

*Race* is sometimes used interchangeably with *culture*, and the confusion deepens. According to Singleton and Linton (2006), in *Courageous Conversations About Race*, culture describes "how we live on a daily basis in terms of our language, ancestry, religion, food, dress, musical tastes, traditions, values, political and social affiliations, recreation" (pp. 169–170). What we may call *race* when we observe individuals acting a certain way may be behaviors they learned within a cultural framework. Race, for the most part, is the meaning "affixed to the melanin content found in the skin, hair, and eyes." Therefore, persons with a lot of melanin are defined as being "of color," and those with little are defined as white (p. 170). Race both "*exists and does not exist*" in the United States and throughout the Western world, and "racial issues are not about physical skin color but rather stem from the meaning and value people assign to skin color" (p. 106). The meaning people assign to skin color is based on a system of power and superiority. Race as a biological reality does not exist, but as stated above, race both exists and does not exist in our everyday lives because people assign meaning and value to others based on phenotypes. Therefore race is based on power and superiority, and culture and ethnicity are based on common heritages.

The AAA concludes that "present-day inequalities between so-called 'racial' groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances" (AAA, 1998, p. 8). These present-day inequalities can impact students and may affect their perceptions of themselves and how they fit into the culture in which they live.

**Think about what the term *race* means to you. Does the above information challenge or change your thinking? Share below.**

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Race may not exist, but racism does exist. *Racism* can be defined as “beliefs and an enactment of beliefs that one set of characteristics is superior to another set (e.g. white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes are more beautiful than brown skin, brown eyes, and brown hair).” A *racist* would then be anyone who “subscribes to these beliefs and perpetuates them intentionally or unconsciously” (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 39).

Our challenge then—if you choose to take up the challenge—is to examine our inner worlds for behaviors and thoughts that could perpetuate racism while continuing our journey to learn what we don’t know we don’t know.

Next, we examine racial identity. Educator Graig Meyer has studied racial identity development for years. He is the father of an African American daughter and two White sons, and part of his interest in the topic stemmed from his personal connection. Graig shares below.

### **On Racial Identity Development**

*I am a white man, a social worker, and an educator. I'm also the parent of three children. My eldest child is adopted and black. My two youngest are biological and white. Through their experiences in school, I've learned a lot about the way one system works differently for people from two different races (even within one family).*

*My daughter had internalized the belief that white kids are smarter than black kids by the time she was in sixth grade. My sons are younger than that still, but I'm sure they'll learn the same thing. My fear is that when they wonder why their sister ended up going to college, their answer will be because she came from a white family. To me that would be a sad answer and create a divide between my own children. I want all of my children to succeed in school, and I want them to learn that kids of all races are intelligent and successful. That's my personal motivation to run a program that ensures every single Student of Color goes to college.*

*We know from research<sup>1</sup> that having a positive racial identity is a precursor for the academic success of Students of Color. Many educators are surprised to hear this because they assume that it's academic success that leads to positive identity development. However, if the positive racial socialization must come first,*

<sup>1</sup>Mary Stone Hanley and George Noblit. 2009. [http://www.heinz.org/programs\\_ cms.aspx?SectionID=233](http://www.heinz.org/programs_ cms.aspx?SectionID=233)

*(Continued)*

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*then schools must consider what it takes to support this process if they want to eliminate racial achievement disparities.*

*Since schools are a primary socialization milieu for all young people, there are a multitude of ways that they help students through various identity development processes. In the case of racial identity development, the first step is that schools must be willing to talk openly about the issue of race, and then second they must be able to show examples of intelligent and successful People of Color that counter the dominant narratives that connect beliefs about intelligence with racial stereotypes. To be blunt, we have to teach black and brown kids that people who look like them are smart and that they are smart too.*

*What I love about working on racial identity development with students is that it is something that they respond to quickly with deep internal motivation. I've never seen a student be lazy or disengaged in the work we do around this topic. Another exciting element is that one of the best ways to approach this topic is through the arts. When we engage students in self-reflective artistic processes that are connected to other curricular content, there is deep engagement, meaningful learning, and powerful results in student identity formation and academic performance.*

### **On Black Identity**

*Many black students struggle with social pressures for them to conform to some singular African American identity. Part of White racism seems to be leaving a very small opening for variation in the ways people can be Black. This is perhaps felt most strongly by students who are racially Black but have cultural identities that are not African American.*

*My students who are Black immigrants (usually Caribbean or African) are often quite confused by how they are related to U.S. Blacks, and their identity development process can be quite painful as they struggle to figure this out. They need a lot of help in exploring this, and often their parents just don't know what to tell them. I also have found this to be true with Black students who are Muslim. In both cases, they acutely feel the label of being Black, but they struggle to fit in with Black peers. One of my Black Muslim students said something that unintentionally showed how he stands apart when he tried to show how normal he is, telling his peers: "I'm just a Black kid who likes alternative rock music like Audioslave."*

*Similarly, I think all non-Black Students of Color need guidance on where they fit in a society that is often stuck in a Black-White racial paradigm. For Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans, there is a common experience of being left out of the dialog about race. When students from these races try to assert their identities, they are often reminded that they are not White nor are they Black. Unfortunately, they are not often enough offered assistance in learning what they are and where they fit in.*

*Race is something we create to categorize people and relate to them. It is solely based on the color of their skin and other phenotype markers. We also create racism based on the categorization around race. Saying we're all one race will not make racism go away. (e-mail message to the author, April 22, 2012)*



Graig shares the conundrum of race with us: race doesn't exist but racism does, and we have to do more than just say we are all one human race. We must act on that knowledge. As we learn about the impact of race, we build a repertoire of resources on which to draw when we interact with students who don't look like us to respect their experiences with race and racism.

## WHAT I LEARNED WHEN I EXAMINED THE CONCEPT OF RACE AND RACIAL IDENTITY

Share your thoughts below.

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1. There is no such thing as different races, according to the American Anthropological Association. All human beings belong to one race: the human race.
2. Race does not exist as a reality, but racism does.
3. There is no separate multiracial species of people. Multiracial individuals are people who self-identify as such or are viewed by others as such because they possess a blending of the phenotypes that are stereotypically applied to different groups of people, artificially called "races" in the United States.
4. People who identify as first generation biracial are using biological race as the basis for that definition—whether they understand this or not.
5. Color, hair, and other phenotypical genes do not bind together. Therefore, within a single family, there is a variety of skin colors, hair textures, and other physical features. There is no fixed racial phenotype because there is no such thing as race.
6. Race was created to give economic advantage to its creators and provide a rationale for enslaving human beings.
7. Having a positive racial identity is a precursor for the academic success of Students of Color.
8. Many Black students struggle with having to conform to a singular African American identity.

Reflect on the following statements.

- Americans are multiethnic.
- Confronting the impact of race and ethnicity in our classrooms includes knowledge of White people who have their own stories of struggle, even if they often overlook the advantages of their skin color.

- Race as a biological construct does not exist, but the consequences of it being a political tool do. Race isn't real, but racism is.
- When discussing oppression, we must avoid the tendency to rank "who suffers most."
- Personal racial histories, or *identity narratives*, offer the opportunity to examine how race is embedded in personal lives and what it means in the broader context.
- Individuals can self-identify differently from others' identification labels for them.
- To work to end racism, we can allow individuals to self-identify, recognize ideologies of racial superiority, and commit to ending systems of racial privilege.

**Circle the statements with which you agree. With which statements do you disagree? In what ways do you disagree? Reflect below.**

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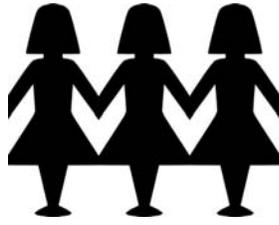
This chapter examined our definitions of race, with an attempt to clarify the question What is race? Why is it important to be clear in our understanding of race and its impact on our students?

In the next chapter, you will read about a day in the life of three educators: Dorothy, Bonnie, and Keith, an elementary school counselor who is the White male father of two Asian children. Once again, these examples are not representative of entire groups but rather illustrate the diverse experiences each of us lives. The more we know and understand about the diversity of others' daily experiences, the more equipped we are to understand their perspectives. This, in turn, builds understanding for the diversity of students who enter our classrooms.



## SUGGESTED READINGS

- Davis, Bonnie. *The Biracial and Multiracial Student Experience: A Journey to Racial Literacy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2009).
- Pollock, Mica. *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real About Race in School* (New York: New Press, 2008).
- Obama, Barack. *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Times Books, 1995).
- Root, Maria. *Racially Mixed People in America* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1992).
- Singleton, Glenn, and Curtis Linton. *Courageous Conversations About Race* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2006).
- Winters, Loretta, and Herman DeBose. *New Faces in a Changing America: Multiracial Identity in the 21st Century* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).



# 5

## A Day in the Life . . .

**T**his chapter discusses White privilege. If you are reading this as a White person, do you possess privilege denied to educators and students who are not classified as White? This chapter examines this issue by describing Bonnie's, Dorothy's, and Keith's days and compares the experiences of a White woman, a Woman of Color, and a White man's sons of Asian culture. Prompts follow to give you an opportunity to reflect on your experiences.

If I, as a White educator, am not aware of what my Whiteness brings to my classroom full of culturally diverse learners, I lack needed information. If I fail to understand the power dynamics of White female culture, I lack needed information. What does it mean to be White in the United States? When I bring up the concept of White privilege during workshops, most White people are surprised with this concept. As a White person, I live with a freedom from negative experiences based on skin color, unless I find myself in a minority position. I don't have to think about my skin color unless I choose to put myself into a minority position or am forced into one. Yet People of Color don't have that option. Glenn Singleton states that each morning he looks out the window as a Black man, while I, as a White person, look out the window as just a person (Singleton, 2003).

### **WHITE PRIVILEGE**

In "White Privilege and Male Privilege," Peggy McIntosh (1998), women studies professor at Wellesley College, defines White privilege as an "invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (p. 291). McIntosh cites

fifty-four privileges that Whites use daily as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions” (cited in Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, p. 292). In this White-dominated society, I wear my Whiteness as an invisible protection each moment of my life.

Think about your day. Do you daily receive privilege due to your skin color? Or do you daily confront the challenges outlined by Dorothy, a Woman of Color? Dorothy, as an African American, does *not* represent *all* persons of cultures who are not classified as White. However, her experiences hold a mirror up to White privilege. Let’s examine the invisible privilege package that I, a White woman, wear in a typical day in my life.

## A DAY IN BONNIE’S LIFE

I awake. I read the paper and watch the television news, where I see White men portrayed as the authority, full of confidence, with a vocal style that matches mine. My speaking patterns are reinforced—they refer to their mothers as “Mother” or “Mom,” not “Mama” or “Mum.” Their vocabulary, even their accent, matches my middle-class, White, midwestern self. I drive to work.

Mostly I pass Whites driving cars as I drive from a suburb up a superhighway that stretches through the middle of St. Louis to the University of Missouri. I see passengers of my own color in the majority of the cars.

At the building where I work, there are approximately twenty-five people. Four are African American women, three of whom are support personnel. None is Asian. None is a Black male. None is Hispanic. I am reinforced throughout my day that my culture is in charge, correct, and successful.

After work I drive to a fitness center where I work out. Usually one or two African Americans work out too, but the interesting thing is that all of the cleaning people and the service people in the coffee shop are Black. The only Black person in the spa section is the receptionist, a light-skinned woman with long, flowing hair. My subconscious mind sees that Blacks clean the toilets at the fitness center, Whites and one Asian do the massages and the nails.

I drive home to a neighborhood block that is 80 percent White. There are a few neighbors who are People of Color. One biracial woman is married to a White male; others are Asian and Hispanic. One is a Black male.

I watch the 5:00 p.m. news. The anchors are White; the important news usually revolves around Whites, usually males. Stories of violence mostly depict Blacks.

My friends are mostly middle-class White women like me. My significant other is a White male. I don’t have to worry about being followed by security at the local shopping mall; I don’t have to worry about being stopped by the police because of my skin color. I don’t have to worry about being invisible in my community. I am acknowledged when I walk up to a counter, whether it is a fast-food place, the cleaners, the video counter, or the local school.

I am White. I have unearned power and freedoms because of my skin color.



**If you are White, in what ways is your day similar to mine? If you are an Educator of Color, in what ways does your day differ?**

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**Think about your Students of Color. In what ways might their days differ from yours?**

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Dorothy's day differs from mine in many ways. As you read her account, think about the differences.

## **A DAY IN DOROTHY'S LIFE**

*In this "White" or "dominant culture" society, I feel like I wear my Blackness as an offense to some people. I do not have just one typical day, because for me the days are a continuum of responses to race and racism. I do not have any protection against what I may encounter—I simply have the wisdom of a warrior.*

*When I wake up, I view the news and hear what seem to be endless accounts of Black-on-Black crime. I see sad mug shots of Black folk, mostly males, and always there is commentary from a family member or bystander. I often cringe, hoping not to hear the name of a former student or one of their family members. I have recognized several over the past twenty years.*

*Despite how my day starts, I manage to make it to the neighborhood coffee shop, pick up coffee, and drive to work pretty happy about what I might encounter. Although I live in an integrated community, I rarely see any People of Color at the coffee shop, not any Asians, Latinos/as, or African Americans—just White barristas and customers. Currently, my workplace has 14 People of Color: 12 African Americans and 2 Chinese. The remaining 100 employees are White. I am one of two African American administrators in the school district. Previously, I worked as the first and only African American administrator for over ten years, and I was the single African American employee in my building for the duration of my tenure with the district. I presume now I work with an ethnically diverse staff.*

*I am challenged on personal and professional levels by issues of race and racism. The challenges do not happen every day, but I have been challenged so many times that there is no doubt to me, and to whoever is privy to the “onslaught,” that it is indeed about my being African American and it is undeniably about race or racism. My decisions may be questioned or second-guessed by the staff members whom I supervise. My ideas sometimes seem to be dismissed or not perceived as legitimate explanations surrounding matters of African American student achievement by my fellow administrators. White parents comfortably insult Black students or me by using racial slurs and blatant stereotypes when discussing matters of conflict between their child and a Student of Color or Teacher of Color. In turn, Black parents comfortably challenge my racial identity or Blackness when they disagree with a decision I have made about their son or daughter who is involved in a conflict with a White student or White teacher.*

*Another insult that I occasionally encounter is that I’m called “nigger” by a White parent who is angry. I have encountered racial slurs numerous times: “nigger,” “Black bitch,” “jiggaboo,” “you’re just one of them.” Equally disturbing, I’m also called some of these racial slurs by African American parents. I have been told by an angry White parent after I suspended her son for fighting that the KKK is watching how I treat White kids. I have been told by a White teacher that I would not be allowed to observe her or I would be sued. I have been told by a White teacher that I better not come into her room or she would report me to the board of education. I have been jokingly told by a White teacher that when the desegregation program started, she had to take down a sign in her room that said “No administrators and no niggers allowed.” While sitting with a group of Black employees at my current job, I have been teased by a White teacher that we are planning a conspiracy together, yet White teachers sit together all the time without fear of being alluded to as conspirators. As an administrator, I try to be professional, friendly, and respectful to everyone. I walk a balance beam because of my supervisory role, and I have to hold back on a personal level because by being a Black supervisor, you are always in fear of being removed from your job. This is a common belief among African American administrators or supervisors in most fields. You have an uneasy feeling that others, especially White people, believe you were hired because you are Black, and you fear you will be fired (laid off, phased out, downsized) because you are Black. I also find in talking with other African Americans that we get the “Black” problems whether they are one of our students or not. And no one wants to admit to that particular phenomenon.*

*The best encounters during my days are with the students. At times it is hard for students to put their feelings of discrimination into words—they just know they were treated unfairly. A teacher may scold them for disruptive behaviors that White students are not reprimanded for by the same White teacher. They may fail classes even though they have completed all the assignments and received passing grades on all those assignments but fail or achieve low test scores. They cannot find any other explanation for the F, nor can their parents. African American students and other Students of Color complain of racism when a White teacher or a White student makes a racially insensitive remark or joke and no one intervenes. I understand that I’m working with middle school students, and their sense of fairness is skewed at times, but I also understand when issues of race or racism are present. In turn, I understand that many White teachers are uncomfortable, untrained, and unable to talk about matters of race and racism.*

### **My Day as an African American**

*My day as an African American runs on a continuum to the degree that I encounter race and racism—not because it’s one day, one morning, or one afternoon; it is ongoing, day after day and year after year. Even in my personal life, I have endured humiliating racial incidents, such as not getting served in a restaurant or standing at a counter for several minutes when a White male or female butts in front of me and gets immediate service. I can be smartly dressed or casually dressed and I’m somehow still invisible. It makes me wonder who really is ignoring me, the person who butts in front of me or the service person who is supposed to be waiting on me. Perhaps the worst is when, for some unknown reason, a White person will drive by and holler out a racial slur at me—I can only pray that a physical attack does not take place next. Sometimes I keep track of this by marking the date it occurred, but eventually I get discouraged, and I think to myself: Don’t keep a record of racism, because it only increases the tension and stress that goes with being a Black person.*

*As my day ends and as I mature in my career, I appreciate the drive home and entering the safe place where I can momentarily think of things that are not about race and racism.*



### **A DAY IN THE LIFE OF KEITH AND HIS SONS**

Keith’s day differs from Dorothy’s in that Keith is a white male who has adopted Asian children. He writes about his journey to understand the impact of race in his children’s lives and, ultimately, in his own life.

**Think first about your own children or a favorite niece or nephew. How would you feel if they were ridiculed, bullied, or made fun of because of their phenotypes—their skin color and facial features? Write your feelings below.**

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*On October 23, 2008, my family officially grew from five members to seven with the adoption of our two sons from Vietnam. When we stepped off the plane at 10:30 that night, I felt that I was prepared to be the parent of the two brothers that looked completely different from me. I had experienced the comments from others of “why are you adopting from there,” or “why not Russia, they will look like you?” I had handled these with as much calm grace and patience as I could muster and felt the better for it. Less than a year after getting Sam and Eli home, we decided that Sam would attend first grade at the school where I am the guidance counselor. Over time I watched Sam handle questions from his peers about why he looked different from me with more grace than I could have imagined.*

*At the beginning of Sam's third-grade year (Fall 2011), we made the decision to move him back to our "neighborhood" school. Eli, Sam's younger brother, was beginning first grade and my wife, Gina, and I felt that would be the best time to make a move. Our rationale being, that now Sam was through the adoption transition he could start developing friendships with kids in our neighborhood. The school is in walking distance in a very White, traditionally Catholic and Lutheran community, where families' parents and grandparents still live.*

*Eli had always been a kid that didn't particularly like going to school and he let us know this. Because he has speech and language deficits, I always assumed that school was just hard for him. Getting him dressed and fed before school was no picnic, but I accounted that to him not being a morning person. The school year progressed for all of our family. It was a year of transition for all of us. Sam and Eli were together at school for the first time, our oldest daughter would be getting married in less than a year, and our second-oldest daughter left home to start her first year of college. This left our youngest daughter, Sam, and Eli at home with Gina and me. Every day I would ask the boys, "How was school?" and I would get the obligatory "Fine." I, again, told myself, "standard answer; everything must be good."*

*Then in January of 2012, while at my school's parent-teacher conferences, things dramatically changed. My daughter, Susie called to say that Sam was very upset and crying after school. The dam had broken and his emotions came pouring out. He sobbed that nobody at school liked him, he was bullied, often-times overtly with kids calling him names and some with racial innuendos. He was left out or ridiculed for following the directions of the class (singing in music class). I rushed home to talk to Sam and get to the bottom of the problem. Sam reiterated everything he had told Susie and asked, "Can I please just go back to school with you?" I immediately shifted into counselor fix-it mode. I made phone calls, talked to my building principal, and filled out forms. In less than a week, I had received permission to immediately transition both boys back to school with me.*

*In the fall of 2010, the staff at my school began a book study on *Courageous Conversations* by Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton. When we started, I remember saying that my goal was to have a better understanding of race and how I could use that understanding to better myself, in particular for my sons. It was in the moment, sitting in my office after I had received word that the boys would be able to move schools, that I realized just how deficient I truly am in the understanding of race. I am a White man, the parent of two Vietnamese children, and I had completely disregarded the effect race had on the treatment my sons had received. A flood of emotions washed over me at that moment. Initially I had felt relief that "I had fixed the problem" for my sons. However, this slowly gave way to a sense of humility and then anger, frustration, and sadness. My relief that the boys would be close, so I could protect them, gave way to the realization that I never could. Their skin color would always identify them as "different" from the White majority. And living in that overwhelmingly White community, they would always be seen this way. As their father, I could no longer bury my head in the sand and deny that race played a part in their experiences. I could no longer stand behind my White privilege that permitted me to deny that not only was race a part of my sons' treatment at school, but that it always would be. It is a part of our community. As a White male I could say, it's because Sam is new, they just don't know him yet, or Eli has language processing delays so he must just not have understood*

*or he got confused. But this implies that not only is this something I, or they, can fix, but somehow they played a part in. If they did something differently, the outcome would have been different. And if I could have this mentality with two people who I love unconditionally and definitely have “mother lion” protectiveness over, how was I viewing and treating the students, parents, and fellow staff members at my school. To continue in this perspective minimizes and discredits their perspectives, beliefs, feelings, and experiences.*

*Although, as a White male, I can never completely understand the perspective of those of color, including my sons, I must do a better job of listening. I must allow them to share their perspectives, feelings, and emotions, and work diligently to empathize with them. This is how I will better myself and become a better father, counselor, and person.*



## UNDERSTANDING PRIVILEGE

**What differences did you find in Bonnie’s day, Dorothy’s day, and Keith’s day?**

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**In what ways might you examine your own freedoms and privilege in every decision that is made in your educational setting?**

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**In what ways might you examine the privileges of White children in every decision that is made in your educational setting?**

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Do you understand how and when *privilege* is used as a verb in your school setting? For example, when a tuxedo business asked six senior boys to model tuxedos for the students during their lunch periods and not one young Man of Color was asked to participate, I went to the administration and complained. The administrators understood, and that is all it took to remedy the situation. Sometimes we just need a set of eyes to call to the attention of well-meaning folks what they do not see. Unfortunately, if a Person of Color had complained, they might have been judged as being overly sensitive.

Learning about race and its impact on those in our society is a lifetime journey. I strongly reject the notion that some White people “get it” and others don’t when it comes to understanding issues of race and racism. I think we continue learning until we die, and I think labeling a person as someone who “gets it” does a disservice to that person, just as labeling someone as a person who “doesn’t get it” is not fair to them. We are all at different places in a lifetime journey, and labeling people only divides us. We can be better colleagues for each other when we listen to others and give them a break instead of judging them.

I truly don’t think I will ever understand the power of race and racism, and I’ve been studying it since 1986. But I have never lived it—I’ve never been a Person of Color in this country. I don’t get it; I just work to learn more.

**After reading this chapter, what are your thoughts?**

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This chapter has examined three educators' days in an attempt to add another dimension, that of White privilege and personal freedoms, to our understanding of what educators bring to the classroom. In the next chapter, we read about the richness and diversity culturally diverse learners bring to the classroom.



## SUGGESTED READINGS

Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stancic. *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

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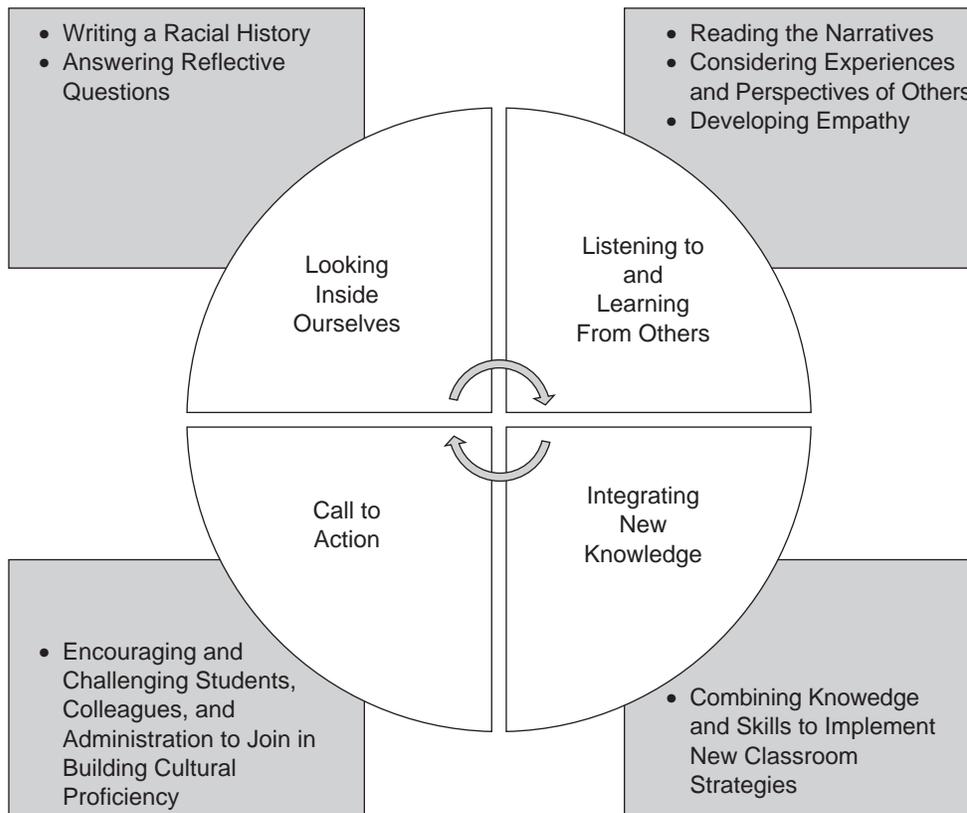
McIntyre, Alice. *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity With White Teachers* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).

Singleton, Glenn E., and Curtis Linton. *Courageous Conversations About Race* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2006).



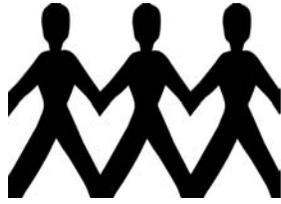
# PART II

## Listening to and Learning From Others



**Interracial Model of Mutual Respect**  
Developed by Bonnie M. Davis, PhD,  
and Kim Anderson, MSW, LCSW, ATR-BC. © 2010





# 6

## **What Do We Need to Know About Culturally Diverse Learners?**

**L**earners enter our classrooms with a diversity of experiences. They may differ from you and each other in ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, learning modalities, cognitive development, and social development (Tileston, 2004; Tileston and Darling, 2008). This chapter examines some of these differences and offers strategies to use in your classrooms. In no way can we cover comprehensively every cultural group of students; however, we offer cultural homogeneities, or norms, for student cultures you may most likely encounter in your classrooms. Included also are strategies suggested in this chapter and throughout this book that are cited in the research as effective for these students.

Our job as teachers is to reach and teach all learners. What might seem an overwhelming task can be better accomplished through understanding ourselves, as well as understanding the cultural practices of the learners in front of us. Experts on culture, such as Sonia Nieto, share with us that culturally diverse students often practice different communication styles from the dominant culture (Nieto, 2000). As a result, we know we may need to use additional teaching strategies from those we have been using with the dominant culture (Marzano, 2004). In addition, our culturally diverse students may require a relationship with us, their teacher, before they decide to learn from

us (Haycock, 2001), and they may be confronting personal issues about which we are unfamiliar.

Some of the differences culturally diverse learners experience are common to *all* learners, and some are specific to culturally diverse groups and individuals. Peer pressure is an example of one experience that occurs in all groups, including students of the dominant culture, but it also varies from group to group. Communication style is another.

The more you know about the cultures of your diverse learners, the better equipped you will be to teach them. One of the best ways to bridge cultural gaps to your diverse learners is to find out as much as you can about them.

## HOW-TO STRATEGIES

### **Level: Elementary/Middle/High**

### **Subject: Cross-curricular**

- Begin with students' names. Ask students to share what their names mean. Teach the class to pronounce each name correctly, and then display them in the classroom in several ways. Introduce the topic by reading "My Name" in Sandra Cisneros's book *The House on Mango Street* (1984, pp. 10–11). This book is available in English and Spanish. Ask for a student volunteer who speaks and reads Spanish to read "Mi Nombre" in the Spanish version (1994, pp. 10–11). This honors the cultural capital of the Latino/a student and allows the student to shine in front of the class. Ask students from other cultures if they have poetry or literature in their home language they can share with the class.
- Ask students to bring in a family item and share it with the class.
- Ask students to draw self-portraits and then display them in the classroom. This allows you, the teacher, to observe how the student "sees" his or her skin color.
- Ask a general question at the beginning of class, such as "What is your favorite food?" "What do you enjoy doing in the evenings after you finish your homework?" Have students each share round-robin.
- Invite parents into the school to interact with staff and students.
- Begin your year by having students write personal narratives about themselves. If you are teaching content other than English in middle or high school, you can tie this assignment to your subject matter and classroom goals. Ask students to write their "math history" or their "science history" (or whatever subject you teach) and tell you how math or science has been a part of their lives. Have them end their history with goals for your class.
- Call each student's family before the year begins and introduce yourself, expressing how excited you are to have their child in your class. Although this is time intensive, the payoff is immense.

## CULTURALLY DIVERSE LEARNERS' COMMUNICATION STYLES

**Think about your classroom communication style. How would you describe it?**

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Keep your communication style in mind as you read the following. How does your style compare with the communication styles of your culturally diverse learners?

Communication styles differ among groups and within groups. Understanding student communication styles is critical. When we don't understand our students' cultural communication style, we may be contributing to their school failure. Some of the things that make up communication style are our nonverbal gestures and our preferences for interacting with others. Even the traditional seating arrangement of our classrooms is not necessarily the best for all students. Some cultural groups tend to learn better in groups and non-traditional seating patterns (Nieto, 1996).

Simple instructional strategies we use may conflict with some students' cultural communication styles. For example, teachers who use short wait times (the time a teacher gives a student to think of an answer after the teacher asks the question) can put some students at a disadvantage, because their cultures may teach them to think deliberately and respond more slowly after considering all options.

When you ask a question of the group, count aloud: 1001, 1002, 1003, 1004, 1005, 1006, 1007. Tell the students you are doing this to give all students an equitable amount of time for their brains to process the answer. Do not use a student's name in your question. When the seven seconds are up, have the students either write their answers on white boards or paper, share with a partner, or raise their hands for you to call on them. Use a stack of index cards or Popsicle sticks with student names on them as you call on students. Draw one and call on the student whose name appears on the card or stick. You will get a response from someone if you allow enough wait time. Consider role playing the first couple of times, answering questions, sharing with students the types of questions that require more thought and those simply needing a simple answer. (Of course, if you are asking many lower-level questions, you may want to examine why you are spending your time at that level.)

Cooperative learning is one strategy worth exploring with Latino/a, African American, and some American Indian students, as well as other

cultural groups who tend to focus on cooperation rather than competition (Gonzalez, Huerta-Macias, & Tinajero, 1998).

## USE OF RHYTHM

Another instructional tool, the use of rhythm, may vary between the culturally diverse learners' culture and that of the dominant teacher's culture. For example, African American adults and children may use a "contest" style of speech, based on the call-and-response patterns found in Black music (Nieto, 1996) and preaching. Teachers who are aware of this can incorporate it successfully into their lessons. You might ask students to create a study guide using a call-and-response mode and create opportunities for students who respond to this cultural mode to use their oral skills as often as possible in your classroom. They can do this through oral presentations and performances. Capitalizing on student cultural capital is one of the best ways to improve achievement and reduce behavior issues. Warning: remember, every student who self-identifies as African American may not know and respond to call-and-response patterns, so don't assume you can implement a one-size-fits-all strategy for any cultural group. First and foremost, each learner is an individual brain, and we must get to know the individual child.

## HOW-TO STRATEGIES

- Use upbeat music to welcome learners into the classroom. Stop the music at the bell. Play calming music at a low volume while students complete a "Do Now" activity.
- Use music as a mental break at intervals throughout the class. Give students thirty seconds to stretch to music.
- Teach call and response. Use it to go over factual material before a quiz.
- Use music for "thinking" breaks or quiet meditation. Teach students how to breathe deeply and relax; then play soothing music and give learners a two-minute mental break to recharge their brains.

## MISREADING CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Misreading cultural communication cues can result in behavior issues and incorrect feedback about learning. One EL teacher misread the nonverbal cues of her Puerto Rican students. When they exhibited a "wrinkling of the nose," she did not know they were signifying they did not understand the material. In some Alaska Native cultures, a wrinkled nose often means no and a raised eyebrow often means yes (Nieto, 1996). Not knowing the nonverbal cues of your students might cause you to assume they are acting in a disrespectful manner or not paying attention, rather than simply following your instructions. In addition, when we do not understand the communication cues of our culturally diverse learners, we may be telling them (unintentionally) that we

don't care enough about them to learn about them. Consider asking students about their nonverbal communication and their latest slang. They usually enjoy sharing what is important to them and playing the role of the expert in the classroom.

In addition to asking the students, another method to learn about cultural communication cues, especially those ELs with special education needs, is to assess students in their homes and communities. By involving parents as participants in these evaluations, educators can "minimize misdiagnoses and inappropriate special education placements" (Garcia, quoted in Artiles & Ortiz, 2002, p. 23). When the values of the educators and the parents differ, there may be cultural discomfort. If educators learn and understand the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic influences of their students and families, they probably will experience improved communication.

## HOW-TO STRATEGIES

- Ask learners to write about and share one nonverbal communication their culture deems important. This can be a folding of the hands in prayer, a friendly gesture, a family gesture to get attention, and so on.
- Ask learners how they signal to others when they want to communicate the following: praise, displeasure, a greeting, boredom, and so on. Make it a fun activity where you and students laugh but learn about each other.
- Have students choose a culture not present in the classroom and share its communication styles.

## CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS

Culturally diverse learners bring with them expectations for classroom communication with their teacher and classmates, especially how they are expected to answer questions in class. Does the student expect to give an individual answer in front of peers, use eye contact, guess an answer, or volunteer in class? These behavior expectations vary among diverse learners. Students also vary as to the amount of teacher guidance they expect (Cloud, quoted in Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). It is up to us to clearly explain when and why we offer individual guidance and help. Once again, unless we make our expectations clear and model them for students, we may be placing our culturally diverse learners in an uncomfortable classroom situation. For the past three years, I have worked in six urban high schools with a large number of culturally diverse students. As we sit in these classrooms and observe the patterns of classroom behavior, we see cultural differences among groups of students. Some tend to be more boisterous; some tend to be quiet; some tend to interact just with peers. Strong teachers in this environment have mediated this situation by using a group structure comprised of different cultural groups. By doing this, we don't see all the Asian students sitting in one area of the room, the African American students in another, and so on. Of course, you must teach students how to work with each other and include a reason for them to do so. Creating a positive

classroom culture where students know and like each other supports this process, and rotating students in the groups throughout the school year eliminates most student objections. The more the students complain, the more feedback you have for the necessity of working on your class culture.

Time on task is another way that culturally diverse students often differ from the dominant culture. How do you expect students to begin class work? Do you expect them to listen to your directions and begin immediately? Or do you take into account group styles? For example, your African American students, because they “have expressed an orientation toward collective responsibility and interdependence” (Hale-Benson, 1986, p. 16), may first interact with others, rather than immediately beginning academic work. If you are a teacher whose style is “Get to work NOW!” you may find yourself frustrated and assume that the students are attempting to avoid doing the work. Being aware of this style difference allows you to make the necessary accommodations that best fit all the students in your classroom. Begin class before class begins to alleviate this issue. Stand at the door, no matter how busy you are, and greet each student with a smile and a welcoming sentence. Allow students to talk until the bell rings; then add your own nonverbal signal. This can be music playing that you stop at the bell or a gong you use to call students to attention. At this time, students begin a “Do Now” activity you have on the board—one they know must be done in total silence. After a five-minute Do Now, begin a general activity to focus the class. One way to do this and incorporate talk and socialization at the beginning of class is to give a question to the class and allow the students to answer one at a time with the option of saying “pass.” This builds community and gets each student’s voice in the air, thus eliminating some of that need to socialize among friends during class time. You will find more examples of how to begin class in the next section of the book.

## **CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS’ LEARNING STYLES**

In a culturally diverse classroom, you will find every learning style, yet students from particular ethnic cultures may respond more willingly to the kind of instruction that is reinforced by their culture. For example, African American learners tend to be multimodal (Hale-Benson, 1986). Their involvement with classroom instruction is cognitive, emotional, and physical, all at the same time. If you are a teacher who learns cognitively, not needing the emotional and physical modes, you may have trouble understanding why some African American students may need emotional and physical connections to the material in order to learn it. You can capitalize on students’ multimodal needs by assigning tasks to students. Active students might get the classroom ready for learning. You might have a student who is a “greeter” and makes sure everyone is relaxed and ready to learn. You might have another who is a “materials” student who gives out textbooks and other materials, and so on.

In her book *The Power of One: How You Can Help or Harm African American Students*, Gail L. Thompson (2010) states that African American learners say that

boredom is one of the main reasons they disengage from class. They want to learn, but they too often feel bored and not challenged. She suggests interviewing your students and asking them what they would do if they were in charge, and then allowing them to create lessons and actually teach them to the class (pp. 90–91). Capitalize on student strengths and embed their strengths into your procedures as well as your content instruction.

In contrast to many African American learners, a newly arrived Vietnamese immigrant learner might feel uncomfortable in an informal classroom where students are expected to ask questions and work together, so you must find ways to respect that student and offer support for becoming part of the classroom culture. Once again, the secret is to know the cultural homogeneities of cultural groups while keeping in mind that each student is a unique brain and may not adhere to his or her cultural norms, as well as learning about each student as an individual.

It is obvious the quiet, traditional classroom in which many of us learned, quietly seated in rows of desks and raising our hands to answer the questions the teacher posed, does not match the cultural communication styles of many of our culturally diverse learners. What can we do?

In *Educating Latino Students*, Gonzalez and colleagues (1998) suggest developing a “learning context that is multiculturally sensitive, where differences are acknowledged and appreciated and where opportunities do exist for learning in nonmainstream patterns” (p. 31). The following are aids for learning about the communication styles of our culturally diverse learners.

## HOW-TO STRATEGIES

- Observe your students’ cultural group in your classroom and throughout the school.
- Adapt your instruction and the curriculum to meet the needs of culturally diverse learners. Instruct them using a range of different modalities and include examples from all the cultural groups in your classroom when you tell stories, use metaphors, and teach the histories of your discipline. To teach math without sharing the contributions of Africans to mathematics misses an opportunity to build awareness of cultural capital.
- Hold meetings at school for parents so you can interact with and learn from them.
- Read books on body language and cultural communications.
- Hold professional workshops about diverse learners in your school.
- Ask your students about their communication styles.
- Ask students’ parents to share their professions with a class.
- Attend conferences that include workshops on your student populations.
- Talk with educators from culturally diverse cultural groups.
- Do home visits and observe your students with their families.

In addition to these suggested strategies, Tharp (quoted in Artiles & Ortiz, 2002) developed several guiding principles for effective pedagogy when working

with ELs with learning disabilities in general education, suggesting we work collaboratively with students; incorporate language and literacy across the curriculum; connect classroom learning to students' lives; and teach higher level thinking through conversation (p. 140).

## PEER PRESSURE

Even when we understand the communication patterns of our culturally diverse learners, we still face the effects of peer pressure, both positive and negative, in our classrooms. There are many peer pressure challenges in cultural groups that I, as a White female teacher, may be unaware of, and yet I often succumb to peer pressures of my cultural group—White females. For example, as a White female, I am acculturated and encouraged to

- Not “rock the boat”; to avoid conflict and maintain the status quo of my dominant culture
- Not say what I really feel in public but rather talk behind others' backs or in the parking lot
- Not be too loud, bold, challenging, or confrontive
- Be *nice* at all times

Of course, these messages have changed from the 1950s to the present day. However, when I work with school staffs, I hear complaints about “bossy” White women, as well as the quiet “niceness” of school staffs during faculty meetings who then eviscerate their administrators afterwards rather than speaking up about their needs. Unfortunately, also, I still see White girls who do not assert themselves academically for fear of being labeled by peers.

## IMPACT OF PEERS ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

In “The Canary in the Mine: The Achievement Gap Between Black and White Students,” Mano Singham (1998) writes of the impact of peers upon student achievement. Examining college students, Singham, using the research of John Ogbu and others, found that Chinese students often studied together and shared tips and strategies for success. African American students, on the other hand, partied together but seldom studied together. Black students often had no idea where they stood with respect to others in the class, and they usually were surprised when they received poor grades, thinking they had done exactly what was expected of them. In addition, Kunjufu (1988) examines negative peer influence on Black students who exhibit “acting White” behaviors. They may be ridiculed by their peers for buying into the dominant culture if they choose to listen in class, do their homework, and make good grades. At the runaway shelter where I taught, young men had to hide their schoolbooks from the neighborhood gang members or risk getting beaten up or killed for “acting White.” To these students, acting White meant they adopted the cultural norms of White culture if they achieved in school. One young man

related that he had to sneak down the back alley to attend the GED program for fear of his life.

Often, students lack the understanding of what it takes to make As and Bs in a rigorous academic setting. Students need to hear that in order to make As and Bs in high school, they must study hours a night, limit phone calls, texting, time on the computer, and television, and set up a schedule for homework. Some students are unaware of what honor roll students actually do in order to make the honor roll. Once again, there are “hidden rules” of academic achievement that must be taught to our children if we want them to achieve academically.

## SKIN COLOR PREJUDICE

Another negative peer culture pressure is skin color prejudice. Why is skin color so important? It is important because it has assigned value and affords privilege to those with White skin (Singleton & Linton, 2006). When my son was growing up, I used to try to figure out just what it was that made others see him as Black. Was it the shape of his nose, his hair, or his skin color? I’m not sure of the answer in his case, but the fact that his skin color is darker than what most define as White makes a difference in the ways others categorize him. And since skin color is an external, physical attribute, we can use it to classify others into groups of the powerful and the not so powerful (Davis, 2009, p. 87).

### **What color is your skin? Does it give you power?**

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### **Has skin color ever robbed you of power?**

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Have you been stopped by the police because of your skin color? Refused service in a restaurant? Passed over for a position? I know none of these things has happened to me.

Others have stories that differ. In St. Louis, where I live, African Americans share stories of the “paper bag” test. They share they were placed into certain public schools based on their skin color. If someone was “light” enough—lighter than a paper bag—they went to different high schools than those with skin darker than a paper bag. They also relate that the test was used for certain sororities and other social groups, and even mate selection. This is a phenomenon many Whites know nothing about, yet my adult African American female friends share stories of how they were included in social groups they can name because their skin was light enough (my friend Dorothy, whose story is told in Chapters 3 and 5), or they were excluded from social groups they can name because their skin was too dark (my friend Roberta, who shares information about her student group in Chapter 17). Unfortunately, families (and society) may still give favor to lighter-skinned children and are more critical of darker-skinned children.

What decisions, knowingly or unknowingly, are made based on skin color? Do I tend to favor lighter-skinned Students of Color because I find them more attractive? Are blond-haired White children preferred over dark-haired children? Is inclusion in particular groups, whether they be cheerleaders or social clubs, ever based on skin color? Educators may deny this occurs, but we need to examine our own preferences and biases and ensure we do not act out on them.

Skin color tension in our schools tends to be more prevalent among females. Prejudice is more prevalent in females because the worth of a female is tied to her physical appearance (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). You only have to look at the magazine covers at the nearest store to see that light skin is valued over dark skin in our society, as evidenced by the sheer quantity of covers featuring light-skinned women. Hopefully, First Lady Michelle Obama and other Women of Color will change this as they grace the covers of popular magazines. Yet presently, it is no surprise that we have internalized the racist message that White skin is superior to dark skin, and the ideal beauty is still one who possesses White skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. As a result, if we possess White skin or blonde hair and blue eyes, we may feel a false sense of superiority to those with darker skin. This false sense of superiority may translate into our body language and cause hostility from those with darker skin with whom we interact.

## COLORBLINDNESS

Often in workshops, I hear educators, who are good people, talk about how they “don’t see color” and consider themselves “colorblind.” They see this as a strength, and they believe it speaks to their equitable treatment of all children. I believe they mean well. However, at the same time, Children of Color see color because of the meaning attached to skin color in this country. Because of their personal experiences and probable incidences of discrimination based on their skin color, they bring that history with them into your class. If you do not recognize they have experienced life differently from the White children in the room, then you deny the Students of Color the truths of their experiences. They look at me, a White teacher, and see I am White. They see which peers are White and which are Students of Color. A very simple strategy for a White teacher to use when working with Students of Color is to acknowledge one’s Whiteness early on in the relationship. That tells the students you know who you are. Skin color carries power and meaning in our society. If you are White and you don’t believe that it does, then shadow an African American teacher for a few days and notice the different experiences she encounters, even though she is an educated woman, just like you.

Skin color as a descriptor is used differently in cultures. With my White friends, we usually use the terms *light*, *medium*, or *dark* to describe a White friend’s tan, and that is only when we are talking about tans, not part of our usual description of a White person. However, among Students of Color, there are scores of words to describe varying shades of the color of one’s skin. Another interesting phenomenon is that my Latino/a and African American friends often describe another’s skin color when talking about them. My son does the same thing. For example, “Sonia has skin the color of

mine,” my son announced when telling me about a college friend. Think about the last time you heard a White adolescent describe another White person. Did she or he add a descriptor of the shade of that person’s whiteness? Listen to your Students of Color when they talk about other Students of Color. What do you hear?

## HOW-TO STRATEGIES

You can fight against skin color prejudice by doing the following.

- Educate yourself about this phenomenon.
- Post pictures of people of all different skin shades in your classroom.
- Build a classroom library of books with Students of Color on the covers and inside the books.
- Post self-portraits of your students on the walls of your classroom.
- With older students, consider discussing racism in its externalized forms and internalized forms as it centers on the issue of skin color. (You may want to show the video of the doll experiment posted on the Web that deals with internalized racism.)
- Continue to reflect and question yourself on your own perceptions of skin color.

If you choose to change a negative peer culture at your educational site, you may want to find students who will work with you (see Chapter 17 for info on student support groups). The key to building the critical mass of students goes back to relationships. If you have a good relationship with your target students, you can begin to build a critical mass of students to focus on achievement goals. The research (Singham, 1998) presents the idea of a “critical mass” of students who need to buy into the idea of academic achievement and who, therefore, create a *positive peer culture* for achievement. Creating that critical mass in your classroom provides a supportive peer network for diverse learners. How do you do that? (See the box.)

**Level: Elementary/Middle/High**  
**Subject: Cross-curricular**

- Call on all students equitably.
- Ensure that your lessons include role models from the cultural groups represented in your classroom.
- Use student names in your examples.
- Impress upon students the necessity of book knowledge so they can’t be cheated in their lives.
- Use cooperative learning.
- Emphasize cooperation and de-emphasize competition.

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

- Use a “We’re all in this together” classroom approach.
- Build a classroom community that expects excellence from each student and allows a flexible time frame for achieving excellence.
- Talk explicitly about the negative effects of peer pressure and how students can counteract them.
- Sponsor clubs (see Chapter 17 for a model) that support academic excellence and offer a support group to students willing to fight negative peer pressure.

The negative peer culture exists because of perceptions and belief systems; a positive peer culture can exist because of perceptions and belief systems too. You and your colleagues can find the ways that work best for you. When you put your plans into action and see the results, you will begin to see the changes in the perceptions of students, as well as changes in the perceptions of the staff.

**Describe the peer cultures at your educational setting.**

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**What strategies might you employ to create a critical mass of positive peer support in your classroom or in your school?**

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## **THE STEREOTYPE THREAT**

**Have you ever been stereotyped? For example, if you are a woman, did others assume you could not change a tire, fix a leaky pipe, or run a business? If you are a male and an elementary teacher, did others assume that you would not be as adept at the job as the females in your building? Think about a time you were stereotyped by others.**

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**When you performed under this stereotype, how did it affect the outcome?**

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Stereotypes are perceptions, and perceptions create our reality. Just as our cultural lens largely determines what we see and how we interpret it, our students' perceptions of themselves may affect their academic achievement. Claude Steele (1999) defines the *stereotype threat* as “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (p. 46). Exploring the impact of the stereotype threat on Black college students, Steele found that when students were presented with a difficult verbal standardized test as a test of ability, Black students performed “dramatically less well than White students,” even though the groups were “matched in ability level” (p. 47). But when they presented the same test as a laboratory task that was used to study how certain problems generally are solved, the Black students' performance equaled that of the White students. Steele suggests that “race consciousness” brings about impaired achievement (p. 47).

Steele and Aronson (Steele, 1999) went on to test their hypothesis with a group of White males. They told the group that they were taking a math test on which Asians usually scored higher than Whites. The result? White males who heard this comment scored less well than the White males who did not hear this comment (p. 48).

The stereotype threat most affects the academically able students. On tests, Black students tried too hard, rereading the questions and rechecking their answers more than when they were not under the stereotype threat. Searching for solutions, Steele (1999) found that Black students who participated in discussion groups in an informal dormitory setting improved their grades and reduced their feelings of the stereotype threat. Steele suggests that we educators might spend more time in developing the trust in our schools with our African American students if we hope to see the academic achievement that our students are capable of demonstrating (p. 54).

You can help students diminish the stereotype threat in their lives by beginning academic support groups to support them by building a peer support network to diminish the stereotype threat. In Chapter 17, you read how these groups teach students how to “do” school in order to academically achieve. You can also discuss with your colleagues ways to build safe spaces for students to discuss these issues in the context of some classes or school forums.

**THE “MODEL MINORITY” STEREOTYPE THREAT**

Asian Americans suffer a different stereotype threat. They often are perceived as the “model minority” and depicted as diligent, quiet, intelligent, and academically able, and they are often seen as immigrants or foreigners, rather than

minorities (Ogbu, cited in Singham, 1998). Stacey J. Lee (1996), in *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype*, finds that the stereotype silences the voices of low-achieving Asian students and denies the complexity of higher-achieving student experiences. In addition, the stereotype reinforces the "racial order by focusing on Asian American success and redirecting attention away from Whites" (p. 99). Lee argues that African American students' failure to "challenge White success is related to the silence that surrounds Whiteness in general" (p. 99). Since the model minority stereotype consists of a comparative and competitive nature, Lee found many African American students in his study who believed Asian American students were a threat. Some even believed that Asian American success was achieved at the expense of African Americans and that they were one more group who had climbed over African Americans to pursue the American dream. Moreover, Lee found a direct link between a "racial group's perceptions of their own position and their attitudes toward Asians/Asian Americans and Asian American success" (p. 121).

Interestingly, most groups of Asian-identified students blamed themselves for the challenges they faced and did not expect the dominant group to accommodate them. Of all the Asian-identified groups Lee studied, only Asian Americans challenged the dominant group. Ultimately, the model minority stereotype has been used to "support the status quo and the ideologies of meritocracy and individualism" (Lee, 1996, p. 8).

While acknowledging that being seen as a model minority carries with it a kind of privilege, Lee states that the dangers exceed the privilege. This stereotype is dangerous because of the way it has been used by the dominant group to silence Asian Americans and their experiences and against other minority groups to silence claims of inequality (p. 125). The research clearly points to the dangers of the stereotype threat experienced by some of our diverse learners.

## HOW-TO STRATEGIES

The following are strategies to support students in combating the stereotype threat.

**Level: Elementary/Middle/High**

**Subject: Cross-curricular**

- Learn about each student as an individual.
- Do not lump students into one ethnic group. Korean students differ from Chinese students. Puerto Rican students differ from Mexican students. Immigrant children face different issues than second-generation Asian Americans or Mexican Americans. The list continues; do not assume all children of any one ethnic group are alike.
- Talk about stereotypes with your class.
- Have students share their cultural experiences.
- Do a daily check of your perceptions. Have student behaviors reinforced stereotypes? Negated them? We tend to see that which reinforces our stereotype, so we must be vigilant in doing daily perception checks.

- Include a variety of role models from the cultural groups of your students, continuing to emphasize that not all Blacks are alike, not all Whites are alike, not all Asians are alike, and so on.
- Share the literature of each of your students' cultures. Poetry, short stories, folk tales, and novels are wonderful ways to learn about cultures and to support positive dialogues.
- Encourage student forums to discuss the issues of stereotypes.
- Invite the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference presenters to work with students and staff.
- Encourage students to write their stories and share them in a writers' showcase (see Chapter 13).
- Use cooperative learning to allow students to get to know each other as individuals.
- Create classroom projects that allow students to get to know each other as individuals.
- Start an academic achievement group for students (see Chapter 17).

This research has profound implications for our school settings. It offers a wonderful vehicle for staff discussion and problem solving. Consider using the Claude Steele (1999) article in a whole-staff discussion (you could also use this in a senior high contemporary issues class, or English or history class). Encourage staff to reflect on times when they felt a stereotype threat. Encourage them to share this with their high school students and ask their input. Discussions about this article with groups of students might encourage an honest look at this dilemma and provide opportunities for problem solving.

Understanding the communications styles of our diverse learners and the effects of peer pressure and the stereotype threat upon them allows us to become more culturally proficient.

## HOW-TO STRATEGIES

The following are strategies to reach diverse learners.

**Level: Elementary/Middle/High**  
**Subject: Cross-curricular**

- Place value on students' home languages and cultures.
- Acquire a basic command of the language of your diverse learners. This may seem extreme, but learning to speak only a few words to your diverse learners in their native language usually will bring smiles to their faces.
- Integrate the culture, experiences, and language of diverse learners into your classroom lessons.
- Set high expectations for all diverse learners.

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- Communicate these expectations to your diverse learners.
- Include professional development focusing on the cultures of your diverse learners.
- Check your instruction to see if you are following the suggestions found in *Educating Latino Students* (Gonzalez et al., 1998): Are you using a learning context that is multiculturally sensitive? Are you acknowledging and appreciating differences among your diverse learners? And are you creating opportunities for learning in ways that differ from the mainstream?

**Which suggestions in this chapter might you consider for your classroom?**

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**Set a goal to implement one to three suggestions or strategies you found in this chapter.**

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In this chapter, you read about many influences on our students' lives, from peer pressure to the stereotype threat. In the next chapter, we closely examine one family's experience with education. Brenda Alvarez, a Latina, shares her family's powerful struggle with acculturating to the educational system in the United States.

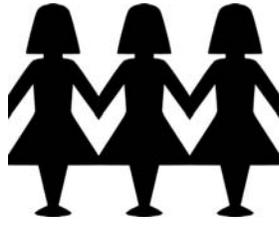


## SUGGESTED WEB SITES

Principles for Culturally Responsive Teaching ([www.alliance.brown.edu/tdl/tl-strategies/crt-principles.shtml](http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tdl/tl-strategies/crt-principles.shtml))

Supporting Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Learners in English Education ([www.ncte.org/cee/positions/diverselearnersinee](http://www.ncte.org/cee/positions/diverselearnersinee))

Why Is Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Important? ([www.tolerance.org/tdsi/crp\\_why](http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/crp_why))



# 7

## Latino/a/ Hispanic Learners

### *A Personal Story*

**T**en years ago I knew very little about Latino/a/Hispanic learners. But today my only grandchild and my daughter-in-law, Brenda Alvarez, are Latina. In addition to a deeply personal reason for learning what I don't know I don't know about Latino/a/Hispanic culture and learners, I have worked with Latino/a/Hispanic students for the past several years in school districts across the country. In this chapter, you will learn factual information about these students. More important, you have the opportunity to read a first person account about a Mexican family's experience with the educational system in the United States.

#### **LATINO/A OR HISPANIC**

In the earlier edition of this book, I discussed the terms *Latino* and *Hispanic* and admitted I used whatever term the school district in which I was working preferred me to use. For example, in a district in Texas, I was told to use *Hispanic*. In a district in California, I used what everyone else used and that was *Latino/a*. But because how people name themselves is so important and I wanted to respect that, I felt a need to learn more. I asked Brenda, my daughter-in-law, which term she prefers, and she shared she uses both, as does the National Education Association (NEA), her employer. I consulted Kim Anderson, my colleague and co-author of *Creating Culturally Considerate Schools: Educating Without Bias* (2012), and she shared her research from her earlier book. In *Culturally Considerate*

*School Counseling: Helping Without Bias* (2010), Kim writes, “Words are powerful. They matter” (p. 7). Understanding the power of words, she researched the use of *Latino/a* and *Hispanic* and found that “the federal government considers race and Hispanic origin to be two separate and distinct concepts, asserting that Hispanics and Latinos may be of ‘any race.’ In fact, there is disagreement within Hispanic/Latino communities and between generations and gender about which term is preferred” (Hede, quoted in Anderson, 2010, p. 6). Furthermore, Kim writes that Dotson-Blake, Foster, and Gressard (2009) state that many regard the term *Hispanic* as being “inadequate for use as a total population descriptor as it neglects to address unique identities of individuals from Mexico, Central and South America, and Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Immigrants from these areas often identify more strongly with their nationality than with their language. The terms ‘Latino’/‘Latina’ have become more widely accepted in an effort to establish an identity with Latin cultural roots rather than those founded in Spanish colonialism” (p. 6). The word *Hispanic* appears to be “more accepted by younger generations, while older Latinos view it as a more pejorative term originating from colonization” (pp. 6–7). After learning the above, I continue to use both terms throughout this book. Once again, I realize I have much to learn from others about their cultures. As a result, I need to listen and learn from our students and their families so I can learn how to best show respect and use what terms they prefer as we build relationships across cultures.

## FACTS ABOUT LATINOS AND HISPANICS

In my current search to learn more about what I don’t know I don’t know about Latino/as/Hispanics, I began a search of government sources. Wanting to share current statistics on Latino/as/Hispanics, I checked the following government Web site: [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov). From there, I searched *Hispanic* and found the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of the term. The definition of Hispanic or Latino origin used in the 2010 U.S. Census is the following: “‘Hispanic or Latino’ refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011, p. 2). The government Web site uses both terms, *Hispanic* and *Latino/a*, to record statistics; therefore, I am using the terms as used on the Web site, which vary throughout the information provided.

Hispanics are one of the largest and fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States, and they are a diverse group that varies in national origin, immigration, and migration patterns. They have settled in diverse communities across the United States. In 2010, there were 47.8 million Hispanic/Latino/as in the United States, or 15.5 percent of the total population. Out of that 47.8 million, more than 15 million are children under the age of eighteen. By 2020, the Hispanic/Latino/a population will reach nearly 60 million (projected at 59.7 million), or 17.8 percent of the U.S. population. The Hispanic/Latino/a population comes from twenty countries in Central and South America, Spain, and the Caribbean.

Between 2000 and 2006, Hispanics accounted for one-half of the nation’s growth, and the Hispanic growth rate (24.3%) was more than three times the

growth rate of the total population (6.1%). The top five states by Hispanic populations are California (13,074,156 persons); Texas (8,385,139 persons); Florida (3,646,499 persons), New York (3,139,456 persons); and Illinois (1,886,933 persons). Approximately 60 percent of Hispanics are native born to the United States and 40 percent are foreign born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Government Web sites offered valuable information for my understanding of statistical information about Hispanic/Latino/as. Learning the “big picture” statistics laid a foundation for examining Hispanic/Latino/a schoolchildren.

## **TODAY’S KINDERGARTEN LEARNERS**

Today around one-third of kindergarten learners are Latino/a (Rong & Preissle, 2009). With Latino learners entering schools from origins in twenty different countries, we educators *cannot* afford to lump all Latino/a learners into one group. We must honor their diversities and learn what we can about the Latino/a learners who sit in our classrooms.

## **RISKS LATINO/A LEARNERS FACE**

In schools, Latino/a learners are a population that faces many risks. Latino/a youth participate at a high rate in health-risk behaviors, “including attempted suicide (10%, a rate 32% to 86% higher than that of Black or White youth), unprotected sex (42%, a rate 12% to 26% higher than that of Black or White youth), lifetime cocaine use (11%, a rate 47% to 600% higher than that of Black or White youth” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, quoted in Kuperminc, Wilkins, Roche, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2009, p. 213). Latino/a gangs make up 46 percent of all gangs in the United States (p. 213). These statistics show us how important it is for us to support our Latino/a learners so they can avoid these risks and experience success in our classrooms and in life.

## **LATINO/A LEARNERS’ COMMON LEGACIES**

The above statistics are frightening, yet Latino/a learners share common legacies that can support them in finding success in school. They possess a “common legacy of language and cultural values, such as personalismo, espiritualidad, and familismo. These cultural values refer to the importance of social support, trust in spiritual support systems, and the extended family, respectively. Latinos/as also share the value of interdependence, in which the family and interpersonal needs are favored over the individual” (Bernal, Sáez, & Galloza-Carrero, 2009, p. 310). When I asked Brenda what cultural norms she felt reflected her Latina culture, she told me that the “group always takes care of its members.” She said that when socializing, no one is allowed to be ostracized or feel left out. She agrees that the family and interpersonal needs are favored over individual needs. In addition, there are other important cultural constructs particular to the Latino community, such as “respeto (respect),

confianza (trust), fatalism (fatalism), controlarse (self-control), and aguantarse (putting up with)" (Bernal et al., 2009, p. 311). These important cultural constructs offer us entry points for creating culturally responsive instruction. Knowing that family and interpersonal needs are often favored over the individual helps us understand why some Latino/a learners don't want to stand out in class but would rather be part of their cultural group, and also why they enjoy working on group projects, unlike some majority students who may prefer to work individually on projects. Of course, we have to remember not every Latino/a shares the same learning needs, so we must still learn each of our students as an individual brain. Yet collectivistic cultures share a common goal of acculturating their children to place family well-being as their ultimate priority (Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2008, p. 51).

With all of these definitions and facts swirling around in my head, I asked Brenda if she would share her story. She was willing to share her knowledge and her family history. Understand that her family history does not represent all Latino/a families, but because of who she is and what she does, she can share firsthand some commonalities about the Latino/a experience. Brenda is a public relations person for the National Education Association and a teacher-advocate who is passionate about securing the best education for all children, including my grandchild, her daughter. By reading Brenda's story, we learn about the world of one Latino family as they emigrated from Mexico to the United States. Even though their story does not represent all families originating in Mexico or Latin America, it does serve to illuminate cultural norms and offers us a narrative to use for collaborative conversations and for learning about what we don't know we don't know.

## **BRENDA'S FAMILY HISTORY**

*When growing up in Chicago, it was common for White people to ask, "What are you, Mexican?" This type of question immediately put me on the defense, and I would become dismissive toward the person. The poor efforts to genuinely engage me tangled with the assumption that because I'm brown, speak Spanish, and live in a predominantly Mexican city were offensive. As it turns out, I am Mexican. However, a better approach would have been, "What is your cultural background?"*

*Words have power, and generalizations and assumptions can dangerously hinder a Latino student's potential for high achievement. However, a wonderful opportunity exists for America's educators to revive the national ideal of a quality public education for every student by having faith in human equality, political democracy, and high faith in the benefits of a rigorous education.*

### **Data**

*I begin with data. Everyone loves statistics, right? Maybe not everyone, but here's something to get you thinking: The U.S. Census reports that Latinos are the second-largest ethnic minority group in the United States, making up 16 percent*

(50.5 million) of the population. This figure represents a 43 percent spike, compared to just twelve years ago when the Latino population stood at 35 million. By 2050, the number of Latinos in America is expected to increase to 30 percent.

When it comes to student achievement, Latino students have seen gains in math and reading scores throughout the years. However, they still lag far behind White students. The most recent 2009 scores from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) show Latino eighth-grade students are 26 points below White students in math and 24 points behind in reading. This means, according to NAEP's definition, Latino students are two grade levels behind their White counterparts.

A growing Latino population coupled with a double-digit student achievement gap is a bad combination. Keeping America strong will require educating Latino students to compete in a global economy—a critical piece for the future of the United States, especially since the Latino population is only going to continue to grow.

Educators don't have an easy task, especially when cuts in education spending threaten quality public education and inherently flawed policies are being widely promoted without much proof of success. Moreover, Latinos come with their own distinct set of cultural norms that are often viewed as problematic instead of an additional resource to bridge Latino culture to the American experience. But, it can be done. Latinos can succeed, and they need your help.

### **Father Rudy**

*Take my father, Rudy. He made his trek to the United States in 1968. He was nineteen years old. Before leaving Mexico, he had finished high school and would be characterized as a good student. He liked history and was great at math. When Rudy arrived to Chicago, Illinois, he enrolled himself as a senior at his neighborhood public high school, thinking he could quickly thrive in an American education setting.*

*"I enrolled in school because I wanted to continue to learn. I was interested in learning English and the history of this country," he recalled, adding he felt his math skills were equal or better than his new American classmates so he wanted to focus on areas where he needed help.*

*The day Rudy enrolled in school everyone was friendly. The school staff wrote down his name; told him about his classes, coursework, and the materials he would need; and they told him the names of his teachers. Rudy was excited about his new life in the United States and the opportunities he knew an education would afford him.*

*His first day of school curbed that enthusiasm. "When I arrived to class my first day of school, the teacher blurted out 'this is your seat,' and that was it. No one ever paid any attention to me—no one bothered with me," Rudy said. When homework assignments were given, Rudy would submit them to his teachers, but he never received any feedback. And, like a lost memory that unexpectedly surfaced, Rudy revealed, "I don't even remember getting a report card! It was difficult. It felt like I didn't exist," Rudy said. "Teachers didn't dedicate any time to me. What I learned, I learned on my own." Communication between Rudy and his teachers was nonexistent because they perceived he didn't understand, which led to the idea that Rudy couldn't learn.*

*His teachers had low expectations for him. However, he expected a lot from his teachers. "I wanted them to pay attention to me. I wanted them to say, 'This is your*

*class and this is what I want you to learn.’ I desired to learn English. I wanted to learn how to read and write. I wanted to learn the details of American grammar.” He concluded, “I would have wanted them to tell me what they could have taught me. But it wasn’t like that.” Rudy was enrolled in school for one year before he dropped out.*

*At first thought, one might wonder why Rudy didn’t just speak up or assert himself more. That would be a legitimate expectation in the United States, except it’s an important distinction because culture often dictates different responses and actions. My father is quiet in nature. His quiet manners were misconstrued as lack of effort. His respect for teachers and authority muffled his irritation to question those who ignored him. His illegal status created angst in bringing any kind of attention to himself. And yes, language did impede Rudy’s abilities to communicate, but it was neither a barrier nor a shortfall in his ability and desire to learn.*

### **Sister Erika**

*Then there is the case of my sister, Erika. She came to the United States in 1976. Erika was five years old and she immediately entered kindergarten. “I was traumatized. Before leaving Mexico, my school elected me ‘Queen of the Class,’ which was a big deal. I was bought a big dress and felt honored,” Erika fondly remembered. “I went from a warm loving school to a place where they ignored me.”*

*Erika shared that her first-grade teacher ignored her to the point where she peed in her pants. “It may have been part of the language barrier, but I wanted to be respectful and I waited to be called on to go to the bathroom. I raised my hand and waved it in the air. She never called on me. So, I peed in my pants—that haunted me for a long time.” The next three years were unpleasant for Erika. Her teachers would mispronounce her name and say in a frustrated tone, “Eureka? What kind of name is that?” Also, Erika’s school didn’t have a bilingual education program. She learned English by listening. “Learning English felt more like a survival mechanism,” Erika said. “Kids would tease me and the teachers wouldn’t acknowledge me. I had to learn to survive,” adding that on occasion she would repeat words she had heard from other students, which would lead to teachers washing her mouth with soap or hitting her with a paddle because she unknowingly used profanity.*

*Despite Erika’s best efforts to fit in with other kids, they would bully and tease her because of her accent and long hair. It even went as far as fighting. She recalled, “Connie had told her older sister I had hit her. It wasn’t true. But during recess Connie convinced me to go behind the field house. Her sister was there. While one held me down, the other hit me.” Erika never shared any of this with her mother because she didn’t want to risk getting in trouble. The thinking behind this was that any phone call from school was bad news and equated punishment.*

*Erika’s outlook on school changed in the third grade. Her teacher was Latino, and he was the first to push Erika to excel. “Mr. Hernandez encouraged me to do well. He even wanted to promote me to the next grade level,” Erika said. “And, Mr. Hernandez would make a big deal about my knowing Spanish and being able to translate better than he.” From this point forward, Erika stopped trying to fit in with her classmates and began to focus on her academics. When asked how teachers had helped her stay focused on her academics, Erika explained, “I had teachers who believed in teaching kids regardless of background. They were aware of diversity and knew more about it.*

*There was a cultural shift within the school and I felt my teachers were encouraging me instead of dismissing me.” Erika concluded, “I got smart and wanted to prove everyone wrong. So, I became more involved in academics. I won science fairs and poetry contests. I was a first chair violinist and had solo performances. I felt I had more help and opportunities than in years past. Before, I was just this crazy little girl, getting her mouth washed out with soap.” My sister went on to being the first person in our family to go to college. She earned a master’s degree in finance and is currently charged with providing financial information to hospital leaders for good patient outcomes.*

### **My Experience**

*My experience in school was different from both my father and sister. I was born in the United States. I started school in the early 1980s. By this time, more minorities were becoming teachers and most of my classmates looked like me. Language wasn’t an issue for me, either. My first language is Spanish, but I had learned English from my siblings before I entered kindergarten, making me fully bilingual. My teachers were hit or miss. I remember my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Thoreau. She reprimanded us for saying “salud” to a boy who sneezed. She thought we were saying “salute,” and found it offensive. When we explained to her that it meant health, she said, “Oh! I didn’t know that,” and allowed us to continue to say it whenever someone sneezed. She also allowed one of my classmates to help me with my math work in Spanish. I didn’t understand the material, but when it was explained to me in Spanish, it became clear. Cultural celebrations were normal in elementary school. We would research flags, foods, language, and dances that represented our culture. We would write essays about everything we learned. It made me proud to talk about my ethnicity.*

*In high school, I had an excellent history teacher, Mr. Tuten. He pushed us to do better and allowed us to question his teachings. For example, one of his lessons dealt with Christopher Columbus, the great explorer and discoverer of America. I respectfully disagreed. I called Columbus a degenerate who was lost, stumbled onto America, and conquered and killed thousands of people. I explained to him that Columbus was not looked on favorably in the Latino community. Mr. Tuten called me cynical. Nonetheless, he allowed me to make my point. Giving me the space to share my ideas based on my culture was important to me and critical to my continuous learning. I felt empowered. Although I didn’t win awards in science fairs, like my sister, I did win awards for writing, which led me to a master’s in communications.*

*And, you would think I’ve forgotten about my mother, Yolanda, who hails from Mexico City. Her educational experience started in 1955 when she entered primary school. Primary school ends in the sixth grade, and it was considered a great accomplishment to graduate since, according to Yolanda, many students leave primary school in the third grade. “Receiving your elementary school diploma was a big deal. But [in the United States], when you tell someone you finished the sixth grade, they think you’re uneducated and a dropout—the system is just different.” Yolanda shied away from her children’s education, saying she didn’t feel comfortable or confident to speak with any of the educators because of the language barriers. “I knew it was difficult for my daughter because she didn’t know English, but neither did I,” Yolanda*

said. "I didn't have a relationship with her teachers since they knew I didn't speak English and so they never invited me to anything."

### **My Brother**

Yolanda's son was different. She admits to spoiling him and allowing him to stay home from school whenever he complained of not feeling well, which was often. She would follow up with his teachers and ask about his behavior, but found it difficult to remain engaged. The advice from his teachers would be to speak with him or take away television privileges. "I would talk to my son about making an effort. He would never say 'no' or push back. He would say 'yes,' but still do whatever he wanted," Yolanda said, adding that it was difficult because she couldn't sit down with him to figure out his homework. Yolanda concluded: "His teachers were friendly, but I don't remember having meaningful conversations with them. After some time, they stopped telling me about his bad behavior, and I would find out only during report card pick up day, which was four times a year."

My brother eventually dropped out his third year of high school. Growing up, he had less responsibility around the house. My parents focused their attention on his ability to play baseball, and not on his academics. I would venture to say that because my brother was coddled at home, he carried that expectation into the classroom setting. When his teachers resisted, he acted out. When asked the question, "Why did you spoil your son?" Yolanda responded: "I don't know. I spoil him to this day because he's the one who needs the most nurturing." This is where culture can betray you. I'm sure you've heard the adage of "Mothers love their sons, but raise their daughters." This was the case with my brother, and it's important for educators to recognize how culture dictates different responses among boys and girls.

When it came to my education, my mother's involvement was nonexistent, especially as I became older. I would ask my mother to help me with my homework, but I remember her saying she didn't understand and how I needed to pay attention in school to master the material. She would say, "Do the best you can," and walk away after kissing me on the head. It was my sister who helped me with my homework. She would pick up my report cards and talk with my teachers. And, whenever a teacher needed to speak with a parent, they called my sister.

During my freshman and sophomore years of high school, I wasn't performing at high levels. Through my own volition, I forged my mother's signature and transferred myself out of school and into a smaller high school that I thought was better for me. It wasn't that my mother didn't care. She knew education was important. She just couldn't get over her own fears, and there wasn't a welcoming bridge to connect her to the school. Both our parents worked a second shift, so when it came time for homework during the week we only had an older sibling to help us.

I share our stories to illustrate real-life examples of what Latino students often encounter: neglect, low expectations, cultural insensitivity, misconceptions, humiliation, mistreatment, and bullying. Parents often feel excluded and unable to form a meaningful partnership with teachers and schools.

Given what we know today about culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as social justice and cultural competency trainings, teachers today have more resources and support to help them become culturally responsive teachers. The National Education

Association's CARE (Cultural, Abilities, Resilience, and Effort) Guide (see [www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org)) on strategies for closing the achievement gaps states, "effective teachers of low-income and/or culturally and linguistically diverse students find ways to connect school to their students' lives every day" by

- Contextualizing or connecting to students' everyday experiences; and
- Integrating classroom learning with out-of-school experiences and knowledge of life inside the community.

The guide also showcases ways to improve a teacher's practice. Some of the suggestions include the following:

- Design lessons that require students to identify and describe another point of view, different factors, consequences, objectives, or priorities.
- Integrate literature and resources from Latino students' cultures into lesson plans.
- Provide instruction that helps to increase the consciousness and valuing of differences and diversity through the study of historical, current, community, family, personal events, and literature.
- Engage Latino students and form a meaningful relationship while pushing them to excel academically.

In the case of Erika, the day Mr. Hernandez encouraged her academically was the day she became self-aware of her intellect and passion for learning. For Rudy, it could have meant recognizing his existence and providing him with rigorous curricula in math. For my brother, it could have meant forging a strong relationship with Yolanda to get her son motivated and engaged, as well as encouraging Yolanda to move beyond her own fears of culture and work together toward a common goal. The latter would apply to me, as well.

### **What Educators Can Do**

Educators need to look at Latino culture as an asset, not a deficit. For example, language in the past was seen as a hindrance. Today, there are ways to move students from their first language to dual-language programs that emphasize cross-cultural learning.

I would also encourage educators to help create a support system with other Latino students to help lead learning as a group (family). Additionally, encourage Latinos to step out of their own comfort zones to take on leadership roles. It's important to recognize that teachers can't do this work alone. It takes a collaborative effort between parents, teachers, and the community to educate students. Latino parents care deeply about their children, but language often impedes their confidence to become involved, as was the case with Yolanda.

Latino parents often bring their negative experiences into the academic lives of their own children. In the past, phone calls from school usually meant bad news; however, more and more teachers are reversing this attitude by calling parents to share good news. They're also visiting the homes of their students, which provides an

*opportunity to forge meaningful relationships with parents and learn about a student's hidden strengths and how to work best with families.*

*Gone should be the days of Latino students feeling neglected, humiliated, or stereotyped because of culture, language, gender, sexuality, or economic standing. Opportunities exist to have open and honest one-on-one conversations with parents to improve student learning. From my personal and family experiences, teachers have made improvements. And though our stories span the course of four decades, many Latino students today face similar problems to that of my father, sister, and brother; especially, when Latino families move to areas that had never before experienced influxes of Latinos.*

*According to a 2003 study by the League of United Latin American Citizens, Latinos are no longer moving to the large urban cities of years past—like Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, or Miami. They are also moving to the suburban outskirts of large cities, including states not traditionally familiar with receiving clusters of Latinos, such as the Mid-South and the Great Plains. It's imperative to the future of the United States to break the cycle and close student achievement gaps within all minority groups, especially Latinos since they (we) will be the majority in the next three decades.*

—Brenda Alvarez, National Education Association Public Relations

**Reflect on what you read. What did you learn from Brenda's story?**

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Brenda's family history helped me understand many things about Latino/a culture. I know I must not lower my expectations for Latino/a learners, and I must take an extra step toward forging a relationship with both the students and their families. As I build this relationship, I need to understand there may be a cultural disconnect between a Latino/a family's values and my own Western European White cultural values. Elise Trumbull, coauthor of *Managing Diverse Classrooms: How to Build on Students' Cultural Strengths*, conducted research that helped me understand this disconnect. She found that a "cross-cultural conflict in values between Latino immigrant families and the schools was the heart of the problem of formal education for the families' children" (Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2008, p. xi). Working with Trumbull, teachers learned that

[P]arents had different goals for child development than they did. For example, they learned that helping one another was a very high priority for Latino immigrant parents, whereas, in the same situation, teachers favored independent achievement. Before that, most had assumed that there were right and wrong ways to do things at school

and with the school. They had never realized that what was right from the school's perspective could be very wrong from the parent's perspective. (pp. xi–xii)

Trumbull and Rothstein-Fisch operate using the premise that “cultural values and beliefs are at the core of all classroom organization and management decisions” and “students’ responses to teachers’ strategies and of students’ own attempts to engage in and influence interactions in the classroom” (p. xiii). They understand that Latin American cultures tend to be far more collectivistic than the dominant, European American culture (Hofstede, quoted in Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2008, p. xix), and that African American culture is also more collectivistic; however, it has strong individualistic elements, too (Boykin & Bailey, quoted in Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2008, p. xix). In their book, Trumbull and Rothstein-Fisch offer a framework for working with students who belong to a collectivistic culture. The group orientation is at the core of this cultural lens. Group work embraces the family core value of placing the “group before the individual.” Successful teachers use group work with support structures to ensure each individual member of the group is successful.

Having a strong family unit and ethnic identification supports Latino/a learners as they come to school ready to learn. What can we do to support them? A young Latino and Latina share their suggestions.

Mani Barajas-Alexander, a Mexican and African American college graduate, tells teachers to

approach teaching in a variety of different ways. Everybody in class learns differently, so teachers should diversify their techniques. Do the same thing for all races and classes. Be open minded to students’ personal backgrounds and what they have experienced. Have the teacher create an environment where everybody feels comfortable because students are not going to share the truth about anything if they’re not comfortable in class. The result is that other people miss out on hearing all the perspectives in the classroom, and everybody’s learning suffers. (Davis, 2009, p. 135)

Christina Amalia Andrade, Latina and White teacher, shares that she uses Spanish to reach her Latino/a learners. While working in a kindergarten class with approximately 20 percent Latino/a learners, she asks the “kids to come to attention in Spanish. When teachers take the time to cross that language, it really means something.” She adds:

I suggest teachers do the following; make an attempt to learn the language, approach the students, and ask how they as a teacher can support them. Connect lessons to the kids in class. I had a chip on my shoulder about that because my ethnic literature experience was not varied. Why not use a piece of literature by Sandra Cisneros? Holden Caulfield is a character that speaks strongly to teen males; even today that’s their favorite book, but I haven’t had a single experience like that.

Understand the audience you're teaching to and tailor your content to that. Bring in short pieces; give everyone something different to talk about. Even if there are no Hispanic kids in class, using Hispanic literature is a valuable perspective to give to other students. High school students are the center of their own world; bringing in multicultural fiction and asking questions such as, "What would that be like?" and "Is that like something I'm doing now?" are important for students. It allows them to step outside of themselves, and I think that's very valuable and gives [them] a perspective. (Davis, 2009, p. 133)

## HOW-TO STRATEGIES

- Learn about the countries of origin of your Latino/a learners.
- Do not assume all Latino learners share the same learning style.
- Ask Latino/a learners to share their cultural heritage.
- Remember that your Latino/a learners may be more communally oriented than individualistically oriented.
- Find out how your students want to be identified.
- Learn to speak some Spanish.
- Be explicit when you give directions. Do not rely on subtle signals that Latino/a learners may not understand.
- Post pictures of Latino/a role models in your classroom and around the school.
- Ask the students to share information in Spanish, such as poetry, the days of the week, numbers, and so on.
- Post Spanish words in your classroom along with the language of your other learners.
- Learn about the holidays and holy days of your Latino/a learners.
- Learn about how race is viewed differently for many Latino/as from other countries than for Whites in the United States; educate yourself on racial identity and ethnicity.
- Establish learning partners in class.
- Use collaborative learning in "family groups."
- Hold class meetings to emphasize the goals of the groups.
- Give students weekly responsibilities to contribute to the group.
- Do class projects; perform authentic assessments of projects.
- Use a class cheer that all students have contributed to in order to begin class.
- Have students write "class books" and share with their families.
- Establish a class code of conduct, emphasizing group goals, not individual goals.
- Include class activities that do not showcase the individual but rather spotlight the group.
- Make a positive call home each night to a different family—one a night.
- Consider implementing home visits.
- Post cultural artifacts and language throughout the classrooms and school.

- Stand out in front of the school in the morning and welcome families.
- Speak individually to each student each day, sharing something positive.

**Choose one to three strategies you will implement and write them below.**

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Rosalinda Velazquez, a sixth- and seven-grade teacher at Volta Elementary School in Chicago, shared the following with me, and it nicely sums up this chapter.

One thing I have learned from working with Latino/a . . . Asian . . . etc., . . . learners is not to lump them all together. I had [worked with] a teacher from Cuba and three students from Mexico. OIL AND WATER! They were all annoyed with me when I thought, “Well, they are all Latino/a!” NOPE! So when suggesting posting Spanish words or other things, recognize all Latino/a cultures are different and the language is sometimes different. (e-mail message to the author, May 1, 2012)

Rosalinda drives the point home: Learn about each student as a unique individual and treat him or her accordingly. And above all, don’t assume all Hispanic students are the same.

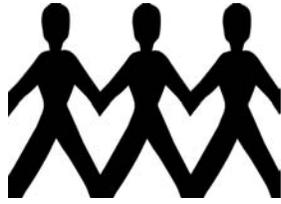
In this chapter, we learned about Latino/a/Hispanic students through the lens of an individual who lives the culture. The next chapter looks at new immigrant learners and suggests strategies for learning more of what we don’t know we don’t know, as well as how to best support these students.



## SUGGESTED WEB SITES

The Crisis in the Education of Latino Students ([www.nea.org/home/17404.htm](http://www.nea.org/home/17404.htm))  
 Educating Hispanic Students: Obstacles and Avenues to Improved Academic Achievement ([www.cal.org/crede/pdfs/epr8.pdf](http://www.cal.org/crede/pdfs/epr8.pdf))  
 Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010 ([www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf))  
 Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center ([www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org))





# 8

## **New Immigrant Learners of the Twenty-First Century**

**T**his book is not intended to be a compendium of information about culturally diverse students. Instead, it offers limited background about culturally diverse students while focusing on how-to strategies for you to use in your classroom. However, learning the histories and cultural information about the groups of students in our classrooms is necessary, and a good place to begin learning about immigrant students of the twenty-first century is with the book *Educating Immigrant Students in the 21st Century: What Educators Need to Know* (Rong & Preissle, 2009). Easily accessible, this book compares the demographic, social, economic, language, and academic characteristics of immigrant learners, aged five to eighteen, from twenty-eight nationalities with significant numbers of immigrant children. It also includes a chapter on children from the Middle East and addresses the difficulties faced by Middle Eastern immigrants due to recent events.

Xue Lan Rong and Judith Preissle state in the book that an “estimated 17 million immigrants entered the United States between 1990 and 2005, and the number of immigrants and their children reached more than 70 million, accounting for more than 20 percent of the U.S. population” (p. ix). A third of these people are from Mexico, and these immigrants came mostly from rural areas and earn minimal wages in the United States.

We can’t describe here each of the 28 immigrant nationalities. However, we can focus on the authors’ recommendations and how we can apply them in the classroom. What can we do in the classroom to support the academic achievement of our immigrant learners? Understanding the motivation of

new immigrant families is a start, and Rong and Preissle point out that immigrant children may do better educationally than nonimmigrant children for several reasons:

- Many recent immigrants were professionals and were well-educated in their home countries, and their children reap the benefit of having educated parents;
- Immigrants on the whole have “higher educational and occupational aspirations than indigenous groups and are reportedly more determined than nonimmigrants of comparable class backgrounds to overcome difficulties and achieve upward social mobility”;
- Immigrant children are more likely than nonimmigrant children to come from intact families with close connections to their ethnic communities; and
- Voluntary immigrants consider education to provide a better life for their children. (Rong & Preissle, 2009, pp. 160–161)

Understanding these factors helps provide a positive attitude when meeting and working with new immigrant learners in your classroom. These beautiful children come, for the most part, wanting to learn. Knowing this, what do Rong and Preissle recommend?

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS WORKING WITH IMMIGRANT CHILDREN FROM ASIA**

- Understand the stereotype of the “model minority” and the negative ramifications it can have for Asian learners.
- Realize that immigrant children from Asia are heterogeneous.
- Be aware that immigrant children from Asia are more likely than other students to be physically and verbally harassed by peers. (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004)
- Understand that racial prejudice plays out in a different form. (Rong & Preissle, 2009, pp. 160–161)

Knowing the above, educators can support immigrant learners from Asia in building self-esteem since Asian learners report the lower levels of self-esteem and the highest grade point averages (Barringer, Takeuchi, & Xenos, 1990). Schools can set up structures to identify Asian children who are experiencing psychological problems. In addition, structures must be in place to identify and work with disadvantaged Asian children.

Recommended for every immigrant group is the necessity of developing and implementing culturally responsive curriculum and instruction. Throughout this book are suggestions and strategies for doing that.

Finally, we need to recruit and retain Asian-American teachers. Asian students account for 4.5 percent of precollegiate students, but Asian teachers make up less than 2 percent of the teaching profession (Rong & Preissle, 2009, pp. 165–166).

## HOW-TO STRATEGIES

- Solicit university students with Asian heritage to be mentors in your school.
- Solicit parent volunteers with Asian heritage to work in the schools.
- Ask authors with Asian heritage to present to the student body.
- Do a book study on a book by an Asian author.
- Offer language study in Asian languages.
- Don't assume all Asians belong to one ethnic group. (When I worked with a panel of Asian teachers in Los Angeles Unified School District, this was their number one pet peeve—each panelist said, “Don't assume I'm . . .”)
- Have students complete self-portraits and bio-poems.
- Ask students to share personal narratives.
- Post pictures of Asian role models.
- Rotate groups in your classroom so Asian students are placed with students of other ethnicities.
- Incorporate Asian literature into your curriculum.
- Share news from Asian countries.
- Give Asian students roles that counter stereotypes.
- Learn about each student as an individual.
- Understand that Asian learners face bicultural challenges in ways both similar and different from Latino/a and African American learners.
- Look for instances of harassment toward Asian students. (Read Keith's story about his sons in Chapter 5.)

## BLACK IMMIGRANT CHILDREN FROM AFRICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Only one of eight Black Americans was an immigrant child or child of an immigrant in 2005. That is changing, however, and Black immigrant learners face different challenges from American Black learners and others. The foreign-born Black population constitutes 8 percent of the entire Black population, and 4 percent are second generation (Rong & Preissle, 2009, p. 169). More Black persons have migrated to the United States from Africa between 1990 and 2003 than in the two preceding centuries combined. For the first time in history, more Black people are arriving in the United States from Africa than during the slave trade (Roberts, quoted in Rong & Preissle, p. 169). Many of these are refugees, and since 2000, around 20,000 African refugees have come annually (Arthur, 2000).

While the White majority population often considers these populations as simply “Black,” Black immigrants come from a number and variety of African and Caribbean countries and may have “quadric-disadvantaged status”—being Black, foreign, poor, and refugees (Rong & Preissle, 2009, p. 172). However, not all Black immigrant children live in poverty. In fact, Black immigrant children (26 percent) are less likely to live in poverty than U.S.-born Black children (31 percent) (pp. 179–182). Black immigrant children coming from

Africa and those coming from the Caribbean are different in the following ways: most current Black immigrants from Africa don't have a family history of enslavement as the Black immigrants from the Caribbean do. And most Caribbean Black immigrants come to the United States for economic reasons, while most from Africa come to escape wars, genocides, and ethnic cleansing (p. 173). Black immigrant children are more likely to speak English than other immigrant children, and they have lower dropout rates than all U.S. immigrant children (p. 193). They are less likely to live in poverty and more likely to live in affluence, with two parents, and with parents who are college graduates (p. 194).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS WORKING WITH BLACK IMMIGRANT CHILDREN**

- Adapt curriculum and instruction to a culturally responsive model.
- Create a caring and culturally supportive school environment.
- Work with families and communities.
- Enhance preservice and inservice teacher training so teachers may recognize cultural differences in acceptable school behavior, cultural norms and expectations, and so on.
- Have training on how to work with immigrants with pronounced and unfamiliar English accents.
- Have training on why there may be animosity between African Americans and Black immigrants.

## **HOW-TO STRATEGIES**

- Include stories and literature from African and Caribbean countries in the curriculum.
- Invite families into the classroom.
- Post pictures of Black role models from African and Caribbean countries.
- Where appropriate, show films by African and Caribbean filmmakers.
- Learn the history of the country of your Black immigrant children.
- Share positive news about the countries of your Black immigrant children.
- Do not assume Black immigrant children will gravitate toward Black American children for special friends.
- Rotate students in groups so each student has a chance to work with others.
- Do not assume Black immigrant children live in poverty.
- Do not assume Black immigrant children understand Black English or African American cultural norms.
- Interview Black immigrant learners about school structures in their country of origin. They may have experienced a very different learning environment.

- Explicitly teach the cultural norms you expect from the learners in your classroom.
- Warmly greet Black immigrant learners into your classroom.

## **IMMIGRANT CHILDREN FROM THE MIDDLE EAST**

Even the definition of what constitutes the Middle East is debated, and immigrant children who come from the Middle East arrive from a variety of countries, such as Egypt, the Palestinian territories, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran. Along with indigenous religions, the Middle East is home to five major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Baha'ism, and Zoroastrianism. Arabic has become the dominant language (Rong & Preissle, 2009, p. 263). Two additional dimensions that affect the identity experiences of Middle Eastern immigrants to the United States are class and gender. The population of Middle Eastern children immigrants, aged five to eighteen, was 400,000 in 2000, with Iranian children comprising the largest group (p. 267).

Middle Eastern immigrant families have parents who are generally better educated than average U.S. parents and with more high school and college graduates. However, immigrant parents are less well-educated than general Middle Eastern American parents. The exceptions are the Iraqi immigrant families, who were the least likely to be high school graduates, but the general Iraqi parent population had higher rates of college graduates than all U.S. parents.

Middle Eastern immigrant children are more likely to speak a language other than English at home than all U.S. children. In addition to being bilingual, Middle Eastern children are less likely to be either physically or learning disabled than U.S. children, with immigrant children more likely than the general population of Middle Eastern children. They are twice as likely as other immigrant children and the general population to be enrolled in private schools. The following are three differences between Middle Eastern immigrant children and other children that educators need to understand: (1) Middle Eastern children are more likely than others to have highly educated parents; (2) the six groups described are diverse in culture and languages, yet similar in educational attainments; and (3) the variations across Middle Eastern children are less pronounced, with the exception of Iraqi children (Rong & Preissle, 2009, pp. 287–288).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND HOW-TO STRATEGIES**

- Challenge stereotypes.
- Acknowledge children's religious diversity and learn about the religions of the learners in your classroom.
- Consider gender influences and differences.
- Recognize influences of individualism and collectivism.
- Hold workshops for staff on Middle Eastern history.

- Be aware of learners who come with traumatic war experiences.
- Self-assess for your biases.

The cultures described in this chapter emphasize the need for us to build relationships with our students from other cultures and to provide opportunities for them to learn about each other and share with others while working together in a classroom community that respects all cultures and works to better understand them. In the next chapter, we examine the reasons behind the learning gaps that exist in many of our schools.

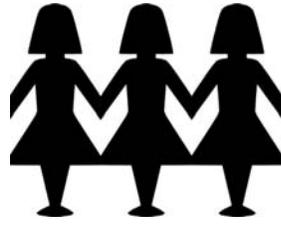


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- Gonzalez, Maria Luisa, Ana Huerta-Macias, and Josefina Villamil Tinajero. *Educating Latino Students: A Guide to Successful Practice* (Lancaster, PA: Technomic, 1998).
- Lee, Stacy. *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).
- Rong, Xue Lan, and Judith Preissle. *Educating Immigrant Students in the 21st Century: What Educators Need to Know* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2009).
- Tileston, Donna Walker. *What Every Teacher Should Know About Diverse Learners* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2004).

## SUGGESTED WEB SITES

- Advocates for Children of New York ([www.advocatesforchildren.org/pubs/imrights/guide.html](http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/pubs/imrights/guide.html))
- Educational Intervention With New Immigrant Students From Ethiopia at the Caravan Parks "Hatzrot Yassaf" and "Givat HaMatos" ([www.icelp.org/files/research/LPADNewImmigrantStudents.pdf](http://www.icelp.org/files/research/LPADNewImmigrantStudents.pdf))
- The New Immigrant Students Need More Than ESL ([www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=EJ740555](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=EJ740555))



# 9

## What the Research Says About Learning Gaps

**D**uring the last century, you probably had not heard of the “achievement gap.” Yet today, talk about the achievement gap, in many ways now a cliché, abounds in faculty meetings, educational journals, and political speeches. Standards, high-stakes testing, and disaggregated data have dropped the challenge to close the achievement gap at our school doors. Successes and failures have given way to the need for consistency in standards, and we now have the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a new hope for today’s schools.

In this chapter we examine causes for low student achievement and learning gaps, both those outside of our control and those over which we exert control. Included in the chapter are strategies to mediate learning gaps in your classroom and school. To close all learning gaps is much more elusive. Clearly, this is a complex and complicated issue that reaches far beyond the classroom door, for these gaps arose and continue as a result of societal issues (Linton, 2011; Noguera & Akom, 2000; Singleton & Linton, 2006; B. Williams, 1996).

What is a learning gap? The term refers to the gap in academic achievement between and among student groups. Presently, the achievement gap shows large percentages of low-income African American, Latino/a, and Native American students at the low end of the achievement ladder, and large percentages of middle- and high-income White and Asian students at the top of the achievement ladder (Johnson & La Salle, 2010).

Even though the gap narrowed among diverse groups in the 1970s and 1980s, this changed in the 1990s (Haycock, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2000; Viadero, 2000), when the gap widened again.

The gaps persist regardless of economic status. By second and third grades, African American, Latino/a, and Native American students are scoring lower than White or Asian students. African American, Latino/a, and Native American students score less well on standardized tests. Gaps persist in additional levels of achievement, such as grades and class rank. Gaps persist in SAT and AP scores. African American, Latino/a, and Native American students earn lower grades in college despite similar admission test scores and earn fewer degrees (Johnson, 2002; Johnson & La Salle, 2010). In addition, African American students are more likely to be placed in special education classes and, once placed, are less likely to be mainstreamed or returned to regular classes (Johnson, 2002).

## CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS

Perhaps one explanation for the learning gap is as simple as the cultural expectations for academic excellence we find in our schools, for we often wear blinders that keep us from seeing the truth. Consider the following scenario.

While teaching a workshop on the gap, I suggested that the school staffs in the upper-middle-class suburban district where the workshop took place have the ability to prepare all of their students for college, notwithstanding those with severe mental disabilities. An elementary school counselor vehemently disagreed, saying, “Not all of our kids have the ability to go to college.”

I then asked the counselor the following question: “You have two children—do you expect them to go to college?”

The counselor answered, “Well, yes,” in an exasperated tone.

“Then why shouldn’t all your parents have the same expectations for their children?” I replied.

The next morning the counselor announced to the group that she had something to say. She told the group that she had never thought of the college question in quite the way it had been asked. She now understood that her blanket assumption that some kids don’t have the ability to go to college was dangerous and potentially limiting to the students in her care, young elementary school children, ages six to eleven, who were in their early years of academic development. The research shows that the initial labels attached to first-grade students placed in high and low groups follows them throughout their elementary and middle school careers (Johnson, 2002).

To assign an assumption to any child at any level can be dangerous. Tomlinson’s (2003) work in differentiated instruction tells us that children learn in different ways and at different rates of speed. Some children need more time than others to process a learning task. Our job is to find ways to support the academic achievement of all children.

In *Data Strategies to Uncover and Eliminate Hidden Inequities: The Wallpaper Effect* (2010), Ruth S. Johnson and Robin Avelar La Salle explore how to expand data use in schools and districts to “delve into more complex issues related to equity and outcomes” (p. 1) building on Johnson’s (2002) earlier book, *Using Data to Close the Achievement Gap*. In these books, you find case

studies investigating equity and inequities for special education students, students who are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, and ELs. You can find additional resources and materials at [www.corwin.com/wallpaperreflect](http://www.corwin.com/wallpaperreflect). Ruth Johnson's (2002) earlier research suggests that it is possible for all students to learn at grade level, and it is also possible to reverse low outcomes for children that others have given up on. The counselor in the scenario above changed her belief system, moving from a belief that some groups of children were less capable than others to a belief that what she expects for her children might be what other parents expect for their children, and that children may be capable of their parents' expectations. These questions spark powerful discussion among staff members and challenge our expectations and perceptions of what children can achieve.

My perceptions of what students were capable of achieving evolved over the years. Several experiences forced me to rethink my assumptions. The following three examples happened in my classrooms.

1. Senior high African American students with C averages were placed in the college-level composition course (in a pilot program), and they succeeded as well as White students who entered with B or A averages. Because of a previous minimum grade requirement for the college credit class, the African American students had not been given the chance to perform in an honors-level class.
2. Men in a maximum-security prison, most with only a GED certificate, not a high school diploma, were placed in a college-level writing class. On the whole, they performed as well as or better than the college students I taught on the university campus.
3. Students who did not perform well in a seventh-grade English class matriculated into honors English during their sophomore or junior years in high school. Because I taught these students both in middle school and as freshmen in high school, I witnessed their cognitive growth as they evolved into honor students. They matured cognitively at a slower rate than other students placed in freshman honors English. However, had they been judged by their seventh-grade English performance and retained in the average track, their potential to do the honors work would have been overlooked.

These three examples illustrate that learners develop cognitively at different rates and are capable of doing higher level work.

**Think about a time when someone in your life did not have high expectations for you. How did you feel? What did you do?**

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**Think about a time when your students outperformed your expectations for them. How did that affect future expectations for your students?**

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Recently, an educator shared that, although she came from a family where no one had previously attended college, she was placed in a high school where nearly everyone attended college. Because her peers assumed that they and she would be attending college, she assumed that she would be attending college. She now holds a college degree and is a teacher. But, she added, had she been in a school where the “school culture” did not support attending college, she might have accepted her family’s past and made no attempt to attain a college degree.

- The school culture determines, in part, the academic achievement of its students.
- Our perceptions (our cultural lens) determine, in part, the academic achievement of our students.

If we want to raise the academic achievement of all students in our schools, we must address the school culture and the personal lens through which we view our students. We have to ask ourselves the hard question: Do we expect to find a learning gap? If so, why? Researchers suggest myriad reasons. The following five offer us opportunities for mediation and change. They are poverty, academic course work, test bias, teacher expectations, and teacher quality.

## **POVERTY**

How does poverty contribute to the learning gap?

Approximately one in five children lives in poverty in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Poverty contributes to lower test scores, psychological stresses, and lack of language acquisition. In addition, poverty and ethnicity are linked. The U.S. Census Bureau shows that more than 36.1 million people, or 11.7 percent, in the United States live below the poverty line. About twelve out of every 100 people live in poverty; however, for Hispanics and African Americans, it is higher. Approximately 24.2 percent of African Americans and 24 percent of Hispanics live at or below the poverty line; for White people, it is 9.8 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). If children are born African American or Hispanic, they have more than twice the chance of being born into poverty.

In *Using Data to Close the Achievement Gap*, Ruth Johnson (2002) states that we must kill the myth that children living in poverty and some racial and ethnic groups are “incapable of anything but low outcomes” (p. 11). In fact, Marzano’s research, cited in *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement*

(Marzano, 2004), indicates that “innate intelligence is not as strongly related to academic achievement as once thought” and “learned intelligence is the stronger correlate of success in school” (p. 13). Therefore, if the knowledge and skill that affluent students bring with them into the classroom is learned rather than innate, then students from poverty can learn it too.

The previous anecdote about the counselor demonstrates the myth that well-meaning educators can carry with them. Only by exposing this myth can we create the academic culture all children deserve.

There is little doubt that poverty plays a role in the achievement gap, yet many educators are aware of data that prove otherwise. In fact, Johnson (2002) finds tremendous resistance to using the data that prove poor children can achieve. She calls this unwillingness to use the data a “conspiracy of silence.” However, when districts use this data with caring educators, it is possible to develop a belief that “all children are capable of achieving at academic levels for enrollment in baccalaureate degree-granting institutions” (p. xvii).

Yet children raised in poverty are more likely to demonstrate the following:

- Acting-out behaviors
- Impatience and impulsivity
- Gaps in politeness and social graces
- A more limited range of behavioral responses
- Inappropriate emotional responses
- Less empathy for others’ misfortunes (Jensen, 2009, p. 18)

These behaviors can add stress to the classroom community the teacher desires to build, and they necessitate a direct teaching of the emotional responses students need for learning. All but the six hardwired emotions of “joy, anger, surprise, disgust, sadness, and fear *must be taught*” (p. 19). Even though it is the primary caregiver’s job to teach the child how to act and what appropriate responses are, if that has not occurred, the school must step in and do the job. Emotions such as “cooperation, patience, embarrassment, empathy, gratitude, and forgiveness” (p. 19) are examples of those we need to teach if our students lack an understanding of them. Once again, role playing is an excellent way to teach emotional responses, as is using writing and discussion in the classroom.

Low-income students represent more than 42 percent of this country’s student population, with African American, Asian, Latino, and Native American students representing 47 percent of public school enrollment. By 2020, there is an expected increase of Asian students (39 percent) and Latino students (33 percent), while White students are expected to decrease by 6 percent (Johnson & La Salle, 2010, p. 20). Due to the number of immigrants entering the United States each year and the competition for jobs, along with increased childbearing, the number of children living in poverty is forecast to increase during the next few decades (Jensen, 2009). The 1999 U.S. Census data (cited in Marzano, 2004) indicated that 33 percent of African American children live in poverty. Even though this is abominably high, we have to remember that the majority of African American children *do not* live in poverty. Yet some educators assume that because a child is Black, he or she must be poor. Many educators equate poverty with lower academic achievement.

It is true that the majority of “schools of poverty” have lower standardized test scores than the majority of schools with an affluent population. Also, fewer students attending schools of poverty attend college. However, having students in your classroom who live in families with low yearly incomes does not automatically mean that these students will not or cannot achieve. There are many additional reasons to consider when examining low student achievement. If you encounter educators who blame low academic achievement solely on poverty, suggest that they check the SAT test scores, which show that poor Whites outperform the most affluent African American students (Singleton & Linton, 2006). This fact alone indicates that other reasons in addition to poverty cause the academic achievement gap between African American students and White students.

One reason, of course, is that schools of poverty usually have fewer resources than schools of affluence. Having worked in schools where 98 percent of the students are on reduced price school meals, the disparities between these schools’ resources and those of the schools in affluent districts are obvious. Some of these disparities exist in the “things” available to both students and staff; some exist in the expectations of both students and staff.

Can you and your school actually address the poverty of your students’ families? Some school staffs do this in creative ways. In one school the principal bought a washer and dryer and allowed parents to clean their clothes at the school if they volunteered while their clothes were being washed and dried. If you consider that a parent may be spending more than \$100 monthly at a Laundromat after paying for the soap, machines, and transportation, this could be a tremendous savings for a family. It also maintains the dignity of the parent.

Other schools provide rooms where children can be fitted for shoes and clothes. Still other schools provide free computer instruction for parents, parent rooms with resources, and so on. So there are ways that schools can mediate poverty while maintaining the dignity of all involved.

**Think about the times when you needed money, perhaps when you were in college. What kinds of stress did that give you? Were you more irritable? Did you make more mistakes than usual?**

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**What things can you do to provide support with dignity for your students living in poverty?**

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