Rethinking Your Culture of Education

Few of us . . . would care to admit that the way we teach compromises the learning of members of certain cultural groups. Yet to avoid or remain insensitive to the cultural issues and influences within our teaching situations under the guise, for example, of maintaining academic standards or treating everyone alike is no longer acceptable.

WLODKOWSKI AND GINSBERG (1995, 8)

If teachers pretend not to see students’ racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs.

LADSON-BILLINGS (1994, 33)

Reflective Activity

Think about your culture. What do people expect of you in your family and in your community? How do people expect you to act? What do others think you should do with your future? How do people around you define success? Does everyone you know have equal opportunities for success? Do you share material items that you own with others frequently? How soon after completing high school are you expected to leave your
parents’ house? Are there any distinct roles for women only, or men only? Do you believe that competition or collaboration is more important for success in school and future successes? What values do you hold that are consistent with the majority of people with whom you interact?

Culture Influences Educational Views

You may not think that your answers to the preceding questions have any impact on your actions as a teacher; however, your responses reveal your cultural perspectives. Howard (1999) believes that Whites fail to recognize that their beliefs concerning education represent a cultural response because those beliefs appear to be shared by the majority. I specifically mention Whites because eighty-six percent of college students in education programs are white (Ladson-Billings 2001). Our beliefs and the way we act on those beliefs define our culture—whatever our backgrounds. It is a culture that defines how schools work—the way teachers and students relate to each other and the significance and value of those relationships in helping children to grow. Each time we step into a classroom, we bring with us a significantly sized suitcase that describes how we perceive our roles as teachers. That suitcase is filled with our years of experience as family members, friends, students, and as teachers. Here’s what most people have in their suitcases:

- beliefs about the role of students in school situations
- theories about how most students learn
- knowledge of the role of homework in American schools
- memories of positive school experiences
- beliefs about parents’ roles in their children’s school experiences
- perceptions that students will be motivated by the threat of poor grades or the promise of good grades
BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL URBAN TEACHER

- a general list of principles students should know as they reach the end of each grade level
- a set of classroom rules that all students will understand and honor
- a picture of how students will respond to requests by teachers
- a belief that competition will inspire greater effort among students
- a belief that it is best for students to work independently to complete school work
- a belief that most students learn information like you do
- the idea that all students are capable of learning everything at the same pace and at the same time
- a belief that if students don’t do well academically, it’s due to their lack of effort or inadequate academic backgrounds—but not due to any fault of ours as teachers
- the thought that parents are only permitted to become involved in their child’s education when they are invited by teachers—usually only when there is a problem.

As you think of your beliefs about school culture, consider the thoughts of Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995): “If we teach as we were taught, it is likely that we sanction individual performance, prefer reasoned argumentation, advocate impersonal objectivity, and condone sports-like competition for testing and grading procedures. Such teaching represents a distinct set of cultural norms and values that for many of today’s learners are at best culturally unfamiliar and at worst a contradiction to the norms and values of their gender or their racial and ethnic background” (7). Let’s examine the influences of our cultural beliefs as they impact our views on schooling.

Reflective Activity

List as many factors as you can think of that influence your beliefs about school (e.g., traditions or motivation to achieve good grades).
I suspect your list of influences includes your personal experiences as a successful student—unsuccessful students don’t usually make it to college. So, as you examine your beliefs, you may notice a considerable resemblance between your reasons for holding your beliefs about schooling and those of your college-educated colleagues, friends, and family members. To find someone whose ideas differ from yours might be difficult because they are not a part of the college scene. Yet, clearly a minority of high school students attends college in America. It’s not appropriate to merely recognize that your views about learning in school are limited to those of primarily academically successful students. Significant change will occur only when your reflection on these issues helps you to see that what you believe about school culture is a limited view of how schools should operate. Your general beliefs about schooling can be an enormous roadblock to your ability to successfully teach many students you will encounter in urban schools.

**The Traditional Classroom—A Limited Perspective on How to Teach**

Picture the typical American suburban high school classroom: Students are sitting in rows and working independently on assignments. Most students behave according to classroom rules developed unilaterally by the teacher. Students spend most class time taking notes, responding to teacher questions, or working on homework individually. Homework is completed diligently and students are anxious to hear what their grades are each week. If students are confused, they may ask questions of the teacher for a few minutes at the end of the period. Curricula are clearly outlined, and variations in either content or the time frame in which the curriculum is completed are not acceptable to teachers, administrators, or parents. All students are given the same assignments and expected to complete them individually. All students are assessed in similar ways with the same tests.

How closely does this scenario resemble your experiences as a student? Think about what your classroom looks like on daily basis. How is your room different? Do expectations for students change? If so, under which circumstances do you alter curricula, instruction, assessment, or standards? What experience will encourage you to think differently? What factors will influence you to alter your strategies for
instruction or the way you assess students? Are you willing to change the curriculum to meet students’ academic, social, or emotional needs? How often will you assign homework? Will your academic expectations of students be reasonable? How will you insure that every student succeeds regularly?

Educators seldom think about their beliefs in these areas because they have experienced similar traditional models of teaching for so many years as a student. In many classrooms in America, students learn in much the same way as they have for over a century—much like the scenario just presented (Good and Brophy 2000). It’s clear why we accept this model of schooling—we have been trained to learn this way since we entered school. It is not likely that four years of university teacher training will alter that (Delpit 1996). It’s time to open your suitcase and reveal that your underlying beliefs about how schools should work are as daunting as the contents of Pandora’s box. These traditional beliefs are based on an ancient model of learning that generally favors only those well-prepared students from established traditional American Caucasian families. Despite the positive feeling you have about your personal schooling experiences, those experiences are most likely far removed from the experiences of urban students, and your views are not likely to change easily (Pankratius 1997).

You might ask, “Why should I change how I teach when so many people experienced this type of instruction?” Indeed, many future teachers have experienced a traditional educational experience. Ladson-Billings (2001) reports that eighty-eight percent of teachers in America are Caucasian, and many are most likely implementing traditional educational practices based on a narrow cultural perspective. Many are afraid to change because those that aspire to be teachers have experienced a traditional teaching and learning model and have succeeded in that educational environment. Many of us are convinced that the traditional schooling we received is the only way to learn because no one has ever asked us to examine or question this system. There is little in our society and the culture of schooling to alter this distorted view that affects so much of how we act as educators; yet, we continue to fail to meet the needs of so many learners when we refuse to change our instructional perspectives and actions! As
Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) state, “Any educational or training system that ignores the history and perspective of its learners or does not attempt to adjust its teaching practices to benefit all its learners is contributing to inequality of opportunity” (26).

A Brave (Entirely Different) New World

If you believe that traditional views about school will work in urban classrooms today consider the following demographics:

- More than a 1,000 students from foreign countries enter our schools for the first time every day (Rong and Preissle 1998).
- In many large public city school systems, seventy to eighty percent of the students are either Latino or African American (Henry and Kasindorf 2001).
- Forty-two percent of all public school teachers have at least one limited-English proficient (LEP) student in their classrooms (Han and Baker 1997).
- Latinos are the largest minority group in eighteen states and represent twelve point six percent of the population in the United States. The population of Latinos in the United States rose sixty percent between 1990 and 2000 (Jennings 2001).
- Mexican American students, who represent ninety percent of all Hispanic students, are increasing at a rate almost ten times greater than the overall population (Scribner 1999).
- Urban teachers report that over fifty percent of their students have problems that the typical classroom teacher is unable to help them with (Haberman 1995).
- The high school dropout rate is close to twenty-two percent for Hispanic Americans, eighteen percent for African Americans, and eleven percent for European Americans (National Education Association 2001).
- Children who are not native English speakers are the fastest growing population of students in America, having increased by almost forty-four percent to over three million from 1986 to 1994 (Macias and Kelly 1996).
In three years, the school population of Hispanic Americans is expected to increase by thirty percent, Asian and Pacific Islanders by thirty-nine percent, African Americans by eight percent, and Native Americans by six percent (Crandall et al. 2001).

The dropout rate among urban youth in large cities is nearly one in every four students (Huston 2000).

Over 125,000 Hmong live in the United States—most in California—and are among the fastest growing populations of Asian Americans (Walker-Moffat 1995).

More than one-third of the students needing special instruction because of poor English skills are enrolled in one of the country’s forty-seven largest city school districts (Rong and Preissle 1998, 31).

Most of the students and their families you encounter in urban schools may not reflect your own cultural experiences, beliefs, values, or economic privileges. Effective teaching can be partially defined as the ability of a teacher to communicate and relate to the students. Forming meaningful bonds with students begins when you meet them for the first time and continues throughout an entire academic year. If you think your students have much to learn, their needs pale in comparison to what you need to learn about them! You can’t teach them until you can reach them—not reach merely their minds—but most importantly you must reach them by touching their hearts!

The Beliefs of Culturally Responsive Teachers

Developing an awareness of other cultures requires identifying your own cultural beliefs. As you think about what you believe about schooling and the roles of teachers, reflect on the questions asked in the previous section and these additional questions: Who are you as a learner? How do you describe the role of a teacher? How do students learn best? What are some other ways that students learn? You may not have answers to these questions—especially as they pertain to the learning
profiles of students who are African or Hispanic Americans; however, it’s time you knew more about alternative ways of learning that are different—but not inferior to the traditional ways with which you are familiar.

Forget the idea of cultural assimilation—the belief that the role of a teacher is to see to it that all students ignore and even forget their cultural, ethnic, and family identities to become more like the nuclear family that dominates much of America. That “melting pot” philosophy is a dated and damaging principle. Weiner (1999) reinforces the absurdity of assimilation beliefs: “I think that American society has shortchanged itself and minorities by insisting that immigrants, African Americans, and Native Americans deny their cultures and languages to become ‘real’ Americans” (7). People who believe assimilation theory arrogantly and egotistically ignore the lifestyles and beliefs of a large percentage of Americans—especially families living in urban environments. Culturally responsive teaching begins when teachers recognize, demonstrate, and celebrate an equal respect for the backgrounds of all students. Ladson-Billings (1994) further explains that, “Culturally responsive teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exists in society” (128).

**Recognizing Cultural and Ethnic Differences: Asking the Right Questions**

Once you have a clear understanding that the way you learned in school is one specific profile of learning, then you may begin to accept that others from different ethnic and cultural settings have different learning profiles. Keep in mind that my focus is specifically on learning; we must understand how our students best learn if school is to have meaning for them.

What cultural differences affect the classroom learning environment? Consider the following issues:

1. What is the social relationship between students and teachers; that is, how are students expected to respond to you as a teacher? Should they look into your eyes when
they speak to you? Are they permitted to challenge your authority? Is laughing with you permitted?

2. What is the role of students during recitations? Students may wonder about the following: Am I supposed to raise my hand when a question is asked? Can I collaborate with others when the teacher asks a question? Am I expected to use my books to respond to questions? Is it acceptable to question another student’s answer?

3. What is the most culturally polite way to address students’ misbehavior? Is it culturally acceptable to single students out verbally in front of others? Should I ask students to cooperate; that is, invite them or is it better to demand compliance through assertive verbal commands? Should I call parents at home or settle problems myself?

4. What’s the best way to help students improve their language so that they speak and write standard and formal English? Should I permit students to speak their language in class and correct them later? Should I correct them every time they use Black English Vernacular or part of their Spanish language in a sentence with mostly English words? How long should I allow them to continue to use Spanish (or other foreign languages) in my room? How should I correct their writing so that they learn to write standard English?

5. How much of my students’ culture should I recognize if I want them to succeed economically in America? Can I use part of their background experiences in my curricula, or should I ignore their culture so that they learn enough about American culture? How important is it to use books and other curricular materials that my students recognize as being a part of their cultural experiences?

6. How much homework should I give to students? Should I expect their parents to help them with homework? Should I give students enough time to complete their homework in school? Should I give different homework assignments to students based on their ability levels?
7. Which reading strategies are going to work better for my students: more emphasis on a process approach or a more linear bottom-up skills approach?

8. How quickly should I move through the curriculum? Is it better to cover all the content in the book or move more slowly so that all students learn the principles well before we move to other topics? Can I leave out certain parts of the curriculum if it doesn’t interest my students as much as it does me?

9. How much collaborative learning should I permit in my room? Shouldn’t I encourage them to work alone most of the time? Wouldn’t competition among students motivate them to work harder? Would some of my students learn better if they were allowed to work with a partner or in a group?

10. Should I grade students using the same standard of acceptable work for all of them? Is it better to give an A or a B to students who are really working hard even though this is their second year in America; or should I just give this student a D because she didn’t meet the school district or state standards?

11. Which instructional strategies will work best for most of my students? Should I use less lecture? Would discussion groups work better for some of the class activities? Should I use less individualized work and more cooperative learning assignments?

12. Is there a better way to group students during independent activities? Should I group students by ability or allow all ability levels to work together?

13. How do the books that I use in my class influence the views of my students? Do the stories and pictures represent the lives of these children or adolescents? What are other sources of diverse literature and historical books that I can use that will better represent my students’ lives?

14. Should I spend any time in class addressing the social and emotional concerns of my students? Is it okay to link their
personal social and emotional problems to some part of the curriculum? How much am I expected to help students with personal problems?

No one expects you to have the answers to all of these questions before you step into a classroom. If you do, then your decisions are based on preconceived notions about your students. Making these kinds of assumptions implies that you possess a set of expected behaviors for both students and teachers that is based on your cultural view of effective teaching—again, a severely limited view. All effective teaching and learning begins with knowing your students; however, we should not generalize. Every class of students differs from the other, and certainly all students who share cultural and ethnic backgrounds are not alike. As Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) state, “There are few hard and fast rules about people, especially those who are culturally different from ourselves” (7). The most important step toward recognizing the cultural needs of different learners is to ask the right questions! A primary goal of culturally responsive teaching is to adjust instruction and curriculum so students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds will have equal opportunities for learning (Ruddell 1999). That won’t occur unless you recognize your beliefs and the possibilities that exist for other ways of teaching and learning.

Realizing the Differences: Examples of Culturally Responsive Actions

The teachers interviewed for this study know their students. They take the time to learn about their students using their backgrounds and experiences as the basis for study. Knowing students is the beginning point for developing meaningful relationships, building trust, comprehending their culture, understanding their families, and as a result, developing significant learning experiences. A central belief among all of the teachers I interviewed is that they can and will help their students succeed academically. This belief is critical to becoming a successful urban teacher. As Jackie was told by an administrator upon
Taking her first teaching position in Harlem, “Honey, we need teachers, not missionaries!” Urban teachers aren’t there to feel sorry for students or to save them, but instead, to help them develop their strengths and improve their weaknesses. Acting in this way requires a belief that all students are learners and capable of growing.

Respect for African American Students and Families

Polly is the high school administrator/teacher in a Chicago public high school for failing freshman and sophomore students. Most of the students in this school are African American with a high number of Hispanics as well. In her words, as an urban teacher, “You must be willing to learn and respect the students’ culture. If you think you’re going to change that culture, you can’t nor should you! Whatever your cultural background, if you act superior in any way, shape, or form—you’re dead meat!” Polly is acutely aware of the gangs that exist within the local neighborhood, and how gang activity affects students in this high school. She describes the school’s intervention upon hearing about an impending gang fight: “We helped to negotiate a truce between two rival gangs—the Blackstones and the Gangsta Disciples by inviting the gang leaders into school to talk to one another. The intervention calmed those students who are required to cross over gang lines to attend school each day.”

Teachers don’t have to be involved in these kinds of threatening interventions. However, the effort alone sends a message to students and families alike that at this school, teachers care enough about students’ lives outside of school to become directly involved in resolving neighborhood difficulties. It is a powerful response.

Polly explains that administrators are required to take courses in African and Hispanic American culture as they become principals in Chicago. She also indicates that African history is an important aspect of the curriculum in her school. Hodges (2001) supports Polly’s curricular decisions when she writes that effective teaching requires that children be “allowed to have their home and community culture, language heritage, and experiences acknowledged and incorporated into their schooling” (3).
One aspect of understanding the culture of African American students is to be aware of one of the hurdles that many such students face in their school perspective: a perception and experience of powerlessness in a predominately White world. Due to these overwhelming feelings of hopelessness African American students may perform poorly academically—they believe that their efforts are feckless because their opportunities to attain power and authority through education will be in vain. Teachers who are unaware of or ignore the racial power structure prolong these negative beliefs. Although often unintentionally, they also deny African Americans and students from other cultures opportunities to grow by using traditional teaching philosophies, curricula, and instructional strategies. Howard (1999) describes the problem: “Individuals from the dominate group are usually unaware of their own power and can carry on the daily activities of their lives without any substantial knowledge about, or meaningful interaction with those people who are not part of the dominant group. The luxury of selective forgetting is not afforded those who have suffered the consequences of White dominance. For them, the American dream has often become an unbearable nightmare. We [Whites] have been able to determine the structure and the content of schooling and in this way have institutionalized our ignorance in the name of education” (58–59).

To act on the racial power issue requires knowledge of the beliefs and motivation to respond through daily contact with students, adjustment of curriculum, and use of alternative instructional strategies that are culturally sensitive to the needs of your students. Colette, the high school English teacher in Philadelphia, explains the importance of power with her primarily African American students: “Students have to feel valued and empowered—you have to connect with them and that takes some strong interpersonal skills.” She also explains how she connects curriculum to her students’ knowledge of social issues and uses their strengths in oral skills to explain literature. “I find that my students aren’t generally strong writers when they begin the year; but, they’re very intelligent when it comes to answering questions about social issues. When we read a piece of literature, I have them evaluate things by trying to connect it to their backgrounds. I was teach-
ing Julius Caesar while Joey Merlino and the mob were involved in a murder trial in a local federal court; so, I related the Julius Caesar betrayal to members of the mob testifying against one another.

“On another occasion, I asked the question, ‘What’s your life like?’ and the issue came up that some of my students knew people who were in jail—a few thought it was cool. The next day one of my students brought in a chilling cut on a CD about being in jail. As I listened to it, it made the hair stand up on my arms. I could see that listening to the CD was something that my students could use to connect our theme to their lives. Listening to that brought up a long conversation that helped my students use their thinking skills. Some of them didn’t want to brag about the idea of going to jail after that discussion.”

Colette understands that to create a culturally relevant curriculum for her students, she needs to listen to them and structure the curriculum in a way that touches her students’ lives. She clearly recognizes students’ strengths and takes advantage of them in planning instruction and curriculum. Ladson-Billings (1994) supports Colette’s instructional practices with her comment, “Students’ real life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the ‘official’ curriculum” (117).

To encourage their writing, Colette invites students to submit their poetry to a publication titled, Pennsylvania Celebrates Young Poets. Eight of her students had their work published in the book. Colette describes the success of a recent refugee student from Sierra Leone: “This student told me how he buried a three-year-old girl when he was hiding from the rebels in Sierra Leone. He saw bodies and amputations of legs and arms. He doesn’t speak English very well, but through his creative writing, he’s had three of his poems published in this book. It gives me an opportunity to know them and to help them with their grammar. You know there are a lot of things these students go through that make them mature; but, emotionally and educationally, they’re still kids.”

Shanika, a second-year Philadelphia middle school teacher, describes her understanding of students: “I’m constantly rethinking how I look at these kids. I think more and more, I’m understanding how different their environment and upbringing are from what I had. I realize I just have to be a lot more sensitive and a lot more aware that this is just a different world.” Weiner (1999) explains how Shanika’s
remark reflects an attribute of effective urban teachers: “I think that the most successful urban teachers regard their students as people from whom they have much to learn as well as much to teach” (59).

Shanika continues describing her own education about her students’ lives: “I was reading a book in which a man describes his life growing up in Philadelphia with gangs. He describes how when he went to school he would go from one culture and value system into an entirely different one. He said it was so artificial to be put in a classroom where he would be expected to follow that value system—to be told to ‘sit down’ or ‘it’s okay to go to the bathroom, now.’ His response was, ‘Why are you telling me how to live my life when I have so much control over my life circumstances outside of school? It’s completely foreign to how I live my life,’ he said.”

Shanika continues: “It’s like we’re expected to instill values, but our values don’t make any sense!” Empowerment for students requires that teachers understand their students’ home lives and respond appropriately in the design of classroom expectations and greater shared responsibilities.

Jackie, whose teaching experiences have been in Harlem and in Philadelphia where most of her students are Hispanic and African American, describes her role as an urban educator: “I believe in a holistic view of teaching where I really try to address the academic, social, and physical needs of students. It’s more important to be holistic in an urban environment because students need support in all of these areas.” She explains her involvement with her students in Harlem: “One of my students once had the chicken pox so badly that he needed to be in the hospital. I stopped in to see him there. I became the parents’ best friend after that and received an invitation to dinner. They were just so thankful that I would show up like that at the hospital.” Urban educators who make a difference in the lives of students deliberately visit families to become more acquainted with their students and parents and to begin to understand students’ ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Jackie adds: “When you communicate with the students in urban settings, you have to be real. You need to admit to students as I have that, ‘I’m not from Harlem in New York
City or Washington Heights in Philadelphia; therefore, your [her students’] life circumstances are not like mine.”

In becoming acquainted with urban children, Jackie discovered that her students, “Don’t deal well with surprises. I let them anticipate what’s going to happen next during the day by telling them exactly what we’ll be doing during each period that we are together and explain how we’ll be learning. They feel comfortable, then.”

Many of Adrienne’s students in a Los Angeles public high school are African American and live in local housing projects. She explains her feelings about being white in an African American neighborhood and school: “My students are very open about being in brown skin. Teaching here is very humbling to me. I realize that there is a privilege that comes with just being white—even if you’re poor and white!” She speaks of her students’ endearing qualities: “These students are warm and sunny and they laugh a lot. They’re really nice kids, and they’ll bond with you when you establish a relationship with them. Kids hang out in my room and ask all types of questions. One recently asked me if I knew an attorney because she and her grandmother were being evicted. Another student was crying in my room when she discovered that her friend had recently died from gunshot wounds.” Adrienne’s remarks show how aware she is of her students’ challenging circumstances. Teachers won’t discover the barriers and challenges their students face without developing the interpersonal environment needed to gain students’ trust through genuine listening and caring.

Anita is a twenty-five-year veteran teacher who, for all but one year, has taught in the same middle school in Philadelphia. Her students are primarily African Americans to whom she teaches language arts and reading skills. She talks about how she connects with her students: “One of the main things I tell them is that I expect them to come to class prepared. I expect when they don’t have things (like pens, pencils, or books), that we can always talk. I journal back and forth with my kids every day. I tell them that if there are concerns, or problems, you can tell me that in your journal. If I read in your journal that you need supplies, I will make sure that you get those—and no one else has to know. There’s a real need for young adolescents to
connect with adults as they pull away from parents. Teachers need to become that other adult. I know you can’t be Mom and Dad all of the time, but I tell my kids, ‘I’m your mother here.’” Responsive teachers treat each child as if he or she were theirs; that’s the message Anita sends to her students. The interactions with students must be genuine, though. Kind words by themselves are not enough to convince students that you genuinely care about them—the old adage, “Actions speak louder than words,” rings so true in developing meaningful relationships with any child!

Effective urban teachers must accept that if they want to do what’s best for all students, using different instructional strategies based on the cultural orientations of African Americans is not racial discrimination; instead, it is a sign of effective teaching that insures student academic success (Gay 2000).

**Understanding Immigrant Students**

Developing a healthy cultural and ethnic identity is challenging for African American students for many reasons; however, the challenges may be multiplied for students from other countries who arrive on American soil speaking another language and may not have received much formal schooling in their native countries. Often Americans make generalizations about certain immigrant students that demonstrate ignorance; for instance, “All Asian students are good at mathematics,” or “Latino students prefer cooperative learning.” These sweeping generalizations harm rather than assist students. When we speak of immigrant students in America, consider all of the possibilities: Asian immigrants could be from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Taiwan, China, Japan, Korea, or many other Asian countries. Pacific Islanders are often identified as Asian students although their cultures are clearly different. Pacific Islanders may include students from Fiji, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other island nations. African immigrants could be from Sierra Leone, South Africa, Ethiopia, Liberia, and other African countries. Many Hispanic immigrants are from Mexico, but others are arriving from Central and South American countries as well as the islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, the Dominican Re-
public, and other islands off the Atlantic coast. Eastern European students bring a distinct culture and a variety of languages to America.

Making generalizations that all Asian or all native Spanish-speaking students have the same academic, social, and emotional learning needs is entirely inappropriate! Naturally, their cultures differ from one another. Responding appropriately to their cultural identities requires you to gain information from your students and their parents through personal discussions and visits into their communities. All of the teachers I interviewed teach immigrant students. Here are descriptions of their understanding of their students’ lives.

Pete teaches high school SSL [second language learner] students in Philadelphia. Most of his students are recent immigrants or refugees from places like Sierra Leone, Cambodia, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Liberia. He describes the challenges his students frequently experience: “A lot of these students stop coming to school after middle school. As these immigrant students become more adept at the language and move out of a protective atmosphere, they become more disillusioned. Some of the African American students resent the Asians because they perceive the Asians as getting things. The Asians move in and the government gives them $20,000 to start a business. The African American students tease the African immigrants about the way they dress. There are a lot of physical exchanges, fights, and intimidation.” Rong and Preissle (1998) explain how many Asian immigrant students experience social problems: “Despite the academic success of some, many Asian students continue to experience feelings of inferiority, alienation, and social isolation in school. Psychologists and sociologists have reported severe problems in development of ethnic identity and ethnic attitude among Asian youth” (146).

Immigrant students are doubly cursed by their lack of language and good organizational skills. Some of the students went from refugee school to refugee school and don’t know the techniques of organizing materials or how to get prepared for class. Pete counters this view to explain that some immigrants are well schooled prior to entering America, particularly students he has encountered from Bangladesh. “All of these students have a tremendous need for attention and
contact. They’re very sensitive to what’s going on around them and want to fit in. I have tried to develop a safe place for the ESOL students—creating a place of security and belonging has been my focus above the academic stuff. The academic stuff can’t happen unless students feel safe, valued, and secure.”

A natural tendency for some immigrant students when adapting to a new language and environment is to sit quietly in class and listen in an attempt to learn the language. Many may feel too embarrassed to speak because they don’t know all of the words they want to use or because they have an accent (Rong and Preissle 1998). Pete recognized this: “When I first started teaching at this high school, there was a tendency by other teachers to give passing grades to students who were quiet. I sent out a letter asking teachers not to do that. I feel it is a disservice to students to give credit when they couldn’t speak the language. Before I started doing that, we were graduating students who couldn’t speak English well enough to pass. When we implemented the new policy, some students became motivated to work harder and some dropped out.” Scribner (1999) informs us that, “When teacher expectations are low, students become vulnerable. They lose interest, develop negative reactions, and perform poorly. The vulnerability of SLL children is further compounded due to the inadequate supply of professionals who share cultural identity with these students” (2–3).

When Pete demanded that teachers hold higher standards for the immigrant students, another dilemma was created: “Some of the teachers and administrators wanted the immigrant students to graduate with all of the same requirements as native students. You can’t possibly expect that. So, the question becomes, ‘Are there going to be accommodations made for all of these students?’”

Without appropriate accommodations, immigrant students whose background educational experiences are limited are likely to fail, drop out, and struggle to achieve some sense of quality of life that education should provide them. Equality in education implies that all students will receive the instructional assistance they need to reach academic success. Students with special needs have at least been provided with the legal means to receive the appropriate accommodations that are needed for them to receive support from schooling experiences.
Many of this country’s urban poor, African, Hispanic, and Asian American, and other immigrant children, however, have consistently been denied cultural recognition and a level of support needed to achieve academic equality or success.

Lisa, who teaches primarily Latino students in a Los Angeles public elementary school, describes how she helps her Spanish-speaking students learn English while getting to know them: “I think my forte is getting students to talk to me. I have a constant conversation about words and rules. I expect them to talk all the time because I know this is how they will learn English.” In her attempts to recognize their cultural heritage, Lisa adds, “I try to respect where they come from. I always find some way to cultivate strengths in students. One of my students can’t read English, so I encourage her to write. I’m trying to find a way inside her head, but I’m not there yet. I must find an ‘in’ for low achievers—a way to help them succeed.” Lisa’s views represent a culturally relevant response as she accepts responsibility for helping students grow despite the barriers they may face. Weiner (1999) describes how some teachers refuse to accept responsibility for their inadequacies: “Rather than saying, ‘I can’t help this kid,’ they say, ‘This kid can’t/won’t learn.’ It’s almost never so clear that a child can’t learn, and in putting responsibility for academic failure on the student, teachers absolve themselves of any obligation to change their own practices” (22).

Jeff, the Wichita high school English teacher, describes the troubling attitudes of some of his colleagues, “Some teachers will say, ‘If I could just teach different kids, I’d do so many different things.’ My response is, ‘Well, these are our students—teach them!’” It means a great deal to Jeff to see students succeed—especially the ones who haven’t in the past. Jeff states that success is measured in many ways. He describes some of the ways he attempts to create success for his students: “I give out my home phone number and encourage them to call. If they didn’t do their homework because they didn’t understand it, I explain that I can’t accept their excuse because they could have called me, and they didn’t. I have been picking a few students up in the morning to bring them to school—sometimes their being here is in itself a success. My wife and I have had students over for dinner and
taken some to football games. Some of these students seem to have the attitude, ‘I’m only here until I get kicked out’; or ‘I’ll leave soon because I’ll flunk too many classes.’ I try to get kids out of bad personal situations and turn them around—that’s success. I want my students to know that something else is possible in their lives—like graduating for some.” Weiner’s (1999) comment supports Jeff’s efforts of becoming familiar with students as a valuable strategy: “The more information you can tap about students’ lives outside of school, the more efficient you’ll become in developing hypotheses and solutions in your teaching” (53).

Diane describes a strategy she used to become acquainted with her elementary students in San Francisco, many who are recent immigrants and second language learners: “One year we made baseball cards of ourselves so we could share our lives with each other. The students provided wonderful descriptions of themselves on these cards. I really learned a great deal about them this way.” There are numerous strategies for gaining information about your students’ cultures. Wagstaff and Fusarelli (1999) describe how one school’s faculty began to learn about their students: “Teachers at this school made home visits at the beginning of the year to get to know parents better. Every teacher also rode student buses during the first week of school to get to know where students lived and the problems and issues they faced and had to resolve” (30).

Assessing Your Cultural Expectations

Reflective Activity

Think about your responses to these questions: How academically capable are urban students? Do limitations exist for academic development of African American and immigrant students? What is the role of a teacher in helping urban students? What percentage of your students will you try to help?

Teachers’ expectations of students’ academic ability and growth potential greatly impact their effectiveness (Ladson-Billings 1994).
Winfield (1986) categorized teachers’ beliefs about inner-city students along four dimensions: seeking improvement as opposed to maintaining the status quo; and, assuming responsibility as opposed to shifting responsibility. Four possible teacher beliefs and accompanying actions derive from this viewpoint:

1. **Tutors** believe the potential exists for students to improve and that they can help.
2. **General contractors** believe that improvement is possible but not with their assistance; instead other school personnel are responsible for helping students (e.g., teacher aides).
3. **Custodians** have little faith in students improving.
4. **Referral agents** don’t believe that students are capable of improving and place the responsibility for maintaining the status quo on special education teachers or school counselors.

Ladson-Billings (1994) stresses that there is a more culturally responsive role for teachers: “Rather than aiming for slight improvement or maintenance, culturally relevant teaching aims at another level—excellence—and transforms shifting responsibility into sharing responsibility. As they strive for excellence, such teachers function as conductors or coaches. Conductors believe that students are capable of excellence and they assume responsibility for ensuring that their students achieve that excellence” (23). Weiner (1999) adds, “When teachers say that certain kinds of children are uneducable, they are expressing frustration and anger at their inability to teach successfully” (22).

Tim, the music teacher from a Minneapolis urban middle school speaks of the vision he has for his African American students: “I have an expectation that students will work when they’re here. I expect students to be striving for their best achievement. We have posters around the school with that phrase, ‘Strive for your best achievement.’

“When I arrived here four years ago, I was the fifth band director in four years. A student asked me that first day if things were going to be different this year. I told him, ‘I’m here to build a band program.’ I
have kept that focus, and every concert over the past four years has been better than the last. I was so excited by one student’s comment her third year with me when she proclaimed, ‘We really sound like a band.’” Tim’s pride was pervasive throughout our conversation as he spoke of the students. Tim is a genuine band conductor, and his attitude about helping his students reach excellence reflects Ladson-Billings’ description of a “conductor” for urban students.

Ladson-Billings (1994) further describes culturally responsive teachers: “They see their teaching as an art rather than as a technical skill. They see themselves as part of the community, and they see teaching as giving back to the community. They demonstrate a connectedness with all of their students and encourage that same connectedness between the students” (25).

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) describe the attitudes such as “The Blame Cycle” that ineffective teachers frequently adopt when they fail to respond to students’ needs (71). The stages of the blame cycle are as follows:

*First stage:* “What the teacher normally does to help student is ineffective.”
*Second stage—student response:* “Student appears unappreciative, frustrated, and/or withdrawn.”
*Third stage:* “Teacher’s further efforts seem to increase mutual feelings of incompetence, frustration, and helplessness.”
*Fourth stage:* “Teacher and/or student begin to feel blameful and start to lower expectations.”
*Fifth stage:* “Self-fulfilling prophecies begin to emerge with tendencies.”
*Sixth stage:* “Student and/or teacher withdraw or become hostile.”
*Seventh stage:* “Teacher and/or student generate stereotypes” (71).

Teachers and students could easily adopt these positions when teachers refuse to respond to the social, emotional, and academic needs of students in a culturally responsive manner. Success needs to be measured one student at a time and with a different measuring stick.
for each student. It is critical to establish realistic expectations, remembering that each student is capable of progressing.

**Culturally Responsive Strategies**

Effective teaching in a classroom of diverse learners requires a multitude of strategies to insure student success. The teachers interviewed described a number of activities and beliefs that demonstrate their concern for the growth of all their students. Some of the strategies for developing a culturally responsive environment include the following:

- Create a classroom and school climate that promotes a community of learners.
- Demonstrate how students can accomplish their best academic work and apply that expectation to all students.
- Establish a caring environment by developing personal connections to all your students (Scribner 1999).
- Demonstrate “an open and accommodating sensitivity to the learner’s knowledge, experience, values, and tastes” (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg 1995, 119).
- “Acknowledge the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups... as they affect students’ dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning” (Gay 2000, 29).
- Actively “facilitate student and family involvement in school life” (Reed-Victor and Stronge 2001, 14).
- Eliminate competition as a means of classroom discourse to enable all learners to be successful at their level of academic ability. (Ladson-Billings 1994).
- Accommodate students’ learning needs by altering instruction and choosing alternative texts, novels, and other reading materials.
- Choose alternative discussion formats that encourage more student engagement through accepting students’ native discourse patterns.
- Reflect on your beliefs about students’ abilities with colleagues, to insure positive expectations for all students.
BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL URBAN TEACHER

- Help students to develop pride in their ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
- Build the confidence levels of students by providing academic challenges that are realistic and attainable for each.
- Demonstrate value for students’ native speech patterns and, in time, model appropriate uses of standard English.
- Use individual and alternative assessment practices that permit students to demonstrate their knowledge in developmentally appropriate ways.

Reading these suggestions is not enough to become an effective urban educator—you must implement them to help urban students. These suggestions represent an initial list of strategies for considering and ultimately meeting the social, emotional, and learning needs of all students. I provided some examples of how these urban teachers use culturally responsive teaching components. More detailed information on effective instructional strategies, appropriate curricular focus, and meaningful assessment activities are provided in later chapters of the book (see Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8). Adopting a philosophy and implementing culturally responsive teaching is not always popular or supported by administrators, parents, or fellow teachers. However, adopting and implementing culturally responsive actions is a critical step in helping students develop personally satisfying lives—now and in the future.

Some teachers may be unable to actually understand or implement culturally responsive teaching due to a cultural handicap; that is a misguided belief they are incapable of transcending. Weiner (1993) explains this barrier, which was defined in a study of 700 teachers by the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning: “Despite course work in multicultural education, teachers could not move beyond two contradictory moral imperatives: all children should be treated equally, and teachers should individualize to accommodate students’ needs” (111). Teachers who comprehend the importance of meeting each student’s needs recognize that all students cannot and should not be treated equally. Try to understand that in an educational realm, equality means “each student gets what he/she needs” (Lavoie 1989). That
translates into establishing a separate set of expectations for each student, utilizing different instructional strategies, offering different curricula, and developing alternative ways of assessing individual students. If you are able to make one outcome a priority of school—to help each and every student grow to an extent that represents her or his cognitive capabilities—then perhaps you will begin to comprehend the meaning and value of culturally responsive teaching.

References


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