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Steven Paul Chamberlain\*

## Coming to Understand Diversity and Education: Life Experiences and Educational Opportunities

**Abstract:** Coming to understand how cultural differences influence interactions between educators and students and their parents is a complex and perhaps life-long discovery. Culture helps to define groups' belief systems and expectations for appropriate behavior, often at a hidden level. Pre-service teachers need multiple opportunities to interact with diverse populations in supervised and reflective environments. This article recounts key experiences in one White American's life that have led to his current understanding of diversity and the role of diversity in education. These experiences occurred throughout my life; some were by chance and others were more prescribed. The article concludes with reflections on lessons learned as they pertain to teacher preparation programs.

**Keywords:** multicultural education, special education, teacher education, cultural diversity

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Let me begin with the confession that I do not undertake this writing without some degree of hesitation. I am very self-conscious about putting my thoughts and feelings "out there" for all to read. To what degree will what I say paint me in one way or another in the eyes of others? Will others misunderstand what I am trying to say here, or worse, will I miss the point on some very important issues pertaining to education and diversity. Recollections at age 50 are fleeting; how do I trust what I remember? I do not take these concerns lightly. To not share my thoughts and feelings about these sensitive topics, however, would be to remain silent about ongoing injustices in our education system – injustices that affect a growing number of diverse children in our society. I believe we each

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have a responsibility to address these injustices and work to make the changes necessary so that all children will have a high-quality education and the opportunity for a happy and successful adult life in our society.

Many experiences have shaped my perspective on multiculturalism and multicultural education. In general, my studies and professional work have focused on the role of cultural diversity in shaping expectations for thinking and behaving in the classroom. How educators respond to diversity necessarily shapes the degree to which we provide culturally responsive instruction and assessment in schools. Multicultural education should go further than incorporating history and literature from and about various cultural groups. I adhere to various models and perspectives that require teaching all students how to enact change in systems that resist equity in schools and society in general (Cummins, 1986; Sleeter & Grant, 1987; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The focus of this article is on my evolving understandings about diversity in the classroom through a variety of life experiences.

## **Awareness from formative experiences**

I grew up in Ft. Worth, Texas, in a middle-class predominantly White section of town. In the mid-1970s, mandatory busing was implemented across the U.S. in an effort to integrate the public schools. For my 4th- and 5th-grade years African American students were bused from the other side of town to my neighborhood school. Then, in 6th grade, I and my neighborhood classmates were bused to a middle school in what was considered the Black side of town. Although the public outcry among many across the south and the north is well documented (Orfield, 1978), overall my experience with busing was positive and I believe a foundation for developing my understanding of diversity. Ultimately, it provided me the opportunity to interact with classmates and teachers from cultural backgrounds that were different from mine during the formative years of elementary school, and my memory is that these interactions were predominantly positive.

It is difficult to remember perspectives from over 40 years ago. From my recollection, the students bused in were African American; my Hispanic classmates lived in my neighborhood, but there were not many. I do not remember thinking of my Hispanic classmates as the “other,” at least not to the extent of my African American classmates who lived in another part of town. Following are some things I do and do not remember about my interactions between White and Black students during these two years.

One common indicator of overt racism in our society is the use of the “n” word. I do not remember the “n” word used in specific instances with friends at school or within my immediate family, but clearly it is a word that has existed in my mind from early in my life. I knew damn well I was not supposed to use it. I realize that just because I do not remember it does not mean it didn’t happen.

I also do not remember fist fights between the two groups of students; however, nor do I remember developing lasting relationships with my African American classmates. When the school day was done, they went back to their side of town. The exception to this was that some students stayed for extra-curricular activities, such as football. I remember two of our three best running backs were African American and I remember that they were fast, and that they were strong, and that they were admired because of this. I do not remember that the White kids looked down on the African American kids, or thought they were not as good or were not as smart. Once again, just because I do not remember that does not mean that that was not the case. It might have happened with other White kids and I was not aware. Or there may have been instances where I did that and I just do not remember. What I do remember is there was uncertainty in the beginning and both groups saw each other as grouped by their color and where they came from.

I do remember a verbal fight between me and Cynthia, one of my African American classmates. As I recall, it began with teasing one another, turned into name calling, then escalated into anger. For whatever reason, this was one of the experiences from elementary for which I have a strong recollection. I remember teasing her by calling her a spaghetti head and an oxytropidoceras (a 100 million year old fossil). She responded with names I had to that point in my life never heard. I’m sure I used the spaghetti reference because of her stringy hair, and the fossil reference because I knew she wouldn’t know what it meant and calling her that would make her mad. Both of us were sent to the principal’s office, where we were disciplined and asked to discuss what had happened and apologize to one another. From that experience I realized, even at that young age, that words could be used in both offensive and defensive ways, to hurt and to protect, and that the exact words really did not matter; it was the intent that mattered. It is also my recollection that Cynthia and I got along fine after that and that I had positive feelings toward her. I knew these students over a two year period, during 4th and 5th grade. I do not recall if these same students went to the middle school where I was bused during 6th grade.

Interestingly, I have a stronger recollection of the African American teachers who taught in my neighborhood school. In an almost exclusively White neighborhood, I had three African American teachers who made a significant impact

in how I viewed African Americans. I remember most of those interactions resulted in positive feelings, but not all. I remember that all three teachers were strong disciplinarians, not afraid to discipline the White students. In one instance I was the one being disciplined and remember being dressed down in front of the other students and feeling very embarrassed. Although I did not have positive feelings toward that teacher at that time, overall, I remember that these three teachers engendered respect, and as far as I knew, my parents backed up these teachers to the same extent they did the White teachers. These teachers came across as strong, no-nonsense teachers, but teachers who also laughed with us and conveyed that they cared for us. To this day, I have fond childhood memories of them. I wish I could speak to them now and find out *their* perspectives of that experience over 40 years ago.

I do not have as strong a recollection of the year I was bused during 6th grade, perhaps because it was only one year. Although there was greater uncertainty, I do not remember being intimidated to go to school there. My friends from the neighborhood were there with me and I remember the teachers as being good teachers and friendly. One memory I have is that I enjoyed riding the school bus. One of the students I shared my seat with was Hispanic and we became good friends that year. It is interesting to note that my six years in band started at this school, where the director, who was African American, taught each of us how to play our respective instruments and helped us to develop a lifelong love of music. I had not thought of Mr. Mitchell in years until his death was brought to my attention a couple of years ago. Many of us wrote about our memories of him on Facebook and it was truly amazing to think about how many lives he had touched in such an important way.

I believe my experience with busing made a significant impact on how I have come to view diversity. In some ways, what I learned from the experience was revealed through reflection over time. I sometimes hear negative opinions about busing, but I generally have positive thoughts and feelings about it and believe I benefited from it. I do question, however, just how much we learned about each other in those three years. The experience of being together itself made a big impact on me, but could the educational outcomes have been greater? What did I learn explicitly about social justice, privilege, power, and the complexities of systemic racism? If multiculturalism means challenging the status quo, was this really a multicultural education?

In addition to ethnic differences, religion was another area where I was forced to reconcile differences between me and some of my friends. My parents always taught me to respect everyone, but I didn't fully understand religious differences. I was raised in the Methodist church and several of my friends and I worshiped at the same church. The great majority of my friends were raised in

Protestant denominations and I sometimes went with friends to their churches. Although there were differences among the different Protestant churches, some of which I did not understand very well, the greater differences seemed to be with my few Jewish and Catholic friends. It is interesting to note that I never visited the places of worship of these friends and that my understanding of how they worshiped was left at a relatively vague level. Outside of the context of religion, these friends were just like my other friends, but I struggled with how these differences fit in with my world view.

## Learning through teaching

As a special education teacher and later as faculty in higher education, I have had the opportunity to work with children and adults at all age levels. Regardless of age, I have learned greatly from my interactions with my students.

### K-12 special education

I began my teaching career as a substitute teacher in Austin, Texas. When interviewing for the position, I was asked if I would consider subbing in special education and I said, “of course,” unaware that I would spend the next several months being called to substitute for either a teacher or paraprofessional in a self-contained unit for students with emotional disturbance (ED). My first day was spent at a junior high in a self-contained unit on the day the space shuttle Challenger exploded. I remember watching the aftermath on TV and seeing one of the students laugh. I was miffed and angry that he could laugh at such a tragedy. It was not until later that I came to understand the emotional issues faced by many children with ED that can lead to such behavior.

The following year I went back to school to work on a Master’s degree in special education and worked as a paraprofessional in a self-contained class for students with ED in a high school in a predominantly African American part of town. For the next five years, I worked as a special education teacher in a culturally diverse, mostly rural, community east of Austin, teaching children identified with emotional disturbance/behavior disorders at different age levels. This population of students was highly diverse in a variety of ways – with respect to culture, language, family finances, reasons for their disability, and life experiences. I attribute a great deal of my growth in understanding culturally and

linguistically responsive instruction and assessment to my students during this time. Much of my growth happened after the fact, upon reflection.

Teaching children with emotional and behavioral problems can be an emotionally draining experience. The first lesson I learned was to not take the students' behaviors personally. I came to the realization that they would have acted the same way with anyone. That was a hard lesson in the beginning. I remember that the Region Service Center had a monthly meeting time for teachers who worked in this area, not only to discuss strategies but also as an opportunity to share frustrations and decompress from the stress of the position. We all laughed that this was our own self-help group.

Another lesson I learned over time was that these children did not want to be the way that they were. They put on facades to mask their pain, but deep down they wanted to change so that they could be happy and successful. The frustrated responses they sometimes received from teachers unfortunately led them to more dysfunctional sets of behaviors. I have often thought that changing teacher responses to these children would be half the battle in changing students' behaviors.

I also learned about humility from my experiences in the classroom. I realized early on that I would learn just as much, if not more, from my students as they would learn from me. One experience was particularly humbling. I was asked to go to the home of one of my students who, with his two siblings, lived with his grandmother. Mrs. H. was not particularly articulate, partially because she had lost most of her teeth. I had spoken with her before but had never visited their home, which was in the downtown area of the small town. As I drove up, I was surprised by the level of disarray of the home. That surprise did not fully sink in until I entered the home and saw that the ceiling in the living room had caved in. There were three rooms – the living room and a bedroom, in which all four slept in the same bed, and a kitchen. I had not realized that this student was living in such conditions and at that time it was hard for me not to think pejorative thoughts about where my student came from. Then, Mrs. H. graciously walked me to the nicest chair in the home, sat me down, and served me with a tall glass of freshly squeezed lemonade. We proceeded to talk about her grandson's schooling and what we together could do to help him. Any doubts I may have had about whether or not the caregivers of my students cared about their children were gone by the end of my visit. Later that year, this family was the beneficiary of a program designed to provide affordable homes for children who lived in dire financial conditions. One of the lasting impressions of my teaching experience is how that home visit changed the nature of my relationship not only with my student but also with his siblings, as they often stopped by my room to say hello and to talk.

## Higher education and a new home

In the fall of 1999, I was hired as an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Brownsville. After 18 years in Austin, moving to a new city was both exciting and unsettling. Brownsville is situated on the Texas/Mexico border. Although the university faculty is relatively diverse, the city of Brownsville is 98% Hispanic, with a substantial percentage of the population speaking only Spanish, which I do not speak. During my time in Brownsville, my understanding of insider and outsider status in cultural groups has evolved, and I have learned much about acculturation. I fit in well at the university and made the adjustment relatively quickly, thanks in large part to the fact that one of my best friends was also on the faculty.

Fitting into the community culture has been a different experience. By the end of my second year in Brownsville, I had married a local woman whose family roots were from Mexico. Sylvia's first language was Spanish and she is bi-literate and bicultural. When I first moved to Brownsville, I felt like an outsider in the broader community. I did not speak the traditional language and did not know many of the cultural mores. I liken it to an experience I had when I was teaching in K-12 schools. One of my paraprofessionals, who is African American, asked me to speak at a single's conference at his church. I was honored to be asked because I had a great deal of respect for him. I arrived the day of the event and soon realized I was one of only two White people at the conference. On the surface, that may not seem like such an awkward situation. I had interacted with diverse people during my life to that point. However, being asked to present and be active in this conference, where I clearly felt like the "cultural other" was a new experience. Everyone at the conference was very welcoming and went out of their way to help me feel like I was part of the group, but I have often reflected on how others in our country feel when they are the one in a large group who is different. This was especially difficult when I first moved to Brownsville.

As my relationship with Sylvia and her immediate and extended family grew, I became less of an outsider because I became a member of that group. Still, I knew that that was different from being born and raised in that particular culture. Over time, I have come to be a part of the community, especially in the area of education. I have also realized that any community has multiple groups of which you may be an insider or an outsider. How we fit into a community depends on our group affiliations and the social supports we have available to us.

Even though Sylvia and I are no longer married, we have continued to have discussions about how she fits into broader U.S. society as a bicultural



individual. This has been difficult for her at times. She holds dual citizenship with Mexico and in many ways self-identifies more as a Mexican citizen than as a U.S. citizen. When Sylvia was six, she was retained for a year in school because she was not talking in class and her teachers were afraid she might have a learning disability. In fact, she was simply going through what Krashen (1982) noted as the Silent Period, where children who are learning a new language are often hesitant to speak the new language until they have been exposed to it for a period of time. I have also heard stories from some of my students who claim their parents did not teach them Spanish because of their own negative experiences speaking Spanish in school, where they were punished for doing so. One of my own great frustrations living on the border is that bilingual education is not valued. Sylvia and I are raising our son together and we both want our son to become bi-literate and bicultural; yet there are no dual language programs where we live other than the programs that transition students to all-English classes by third grade. It is no coincidence that third grade is the grade where students begin state-wide testing. Because of this, one of the great natural assets in the community, children's ability to speak two languages, is devalued and ignored as an academic strength.

My experiences in Brownsville have taught me a lot about diversity. Oftentimes, people (both in and out of Brownsville) discuss diversity in terms of having people in the community from different ethnic backgrounds and different countries. I think, however, that this general perspective leads us to often miss the more integral aspects of diversity. I challenge my students to go into local classrooms and document the kinds of diversity they see. I ask them to consider a variety of questions. For example, what does the term "Hispanic" mean in the big picture of diversity? Does that provide great insight into the cultural background of students? Do Cuban Americans, Puerto Rican Americans, Mexican Americans, and Americans originally from Central America have predictably similar cultural mores? In talking with individuals with Mexican roots, they will also point out that cultural traditions vary substantially from state to state. One of the greatest areas of diversity in Brownsville classrooms is in language proficiency. Some students are proficient in both English and Spanish oral language. Some are proficient in Spanish but not in English, and vice versa. Many are somewhere in between complete lack of proficiency and native-like proficiency, for one or both languages. Within classrooms, there are numerous profiles. One can also consider family financial status, religion, and the number of years students' families have lived in the U.S. Looking at such a vast array of variables, it is easy to see that what appears to be a static 98% Hispanic population is actually quite diverse. The way we view diversity with such generality at the higher education level and then define populations in conducting educational research is often limited and problematic.

## Developing deeper awareness from personal relationships

My understanding of cultural difference and how those differences affect perceptions and interactions has grown greatly through close personal relationships. Although I choose not to share too much information about my personal life here, I think it is important to discuss some basic observations as they have influenced my understanding of culture's role in communicating and interacting with one another. One observation is that the role of culture in how culturally different people interact is sometimes difficult to detect. Interactions occur at different levels, and sometimes we are left with a vague understanding that our attempts at communication were not completely successful, while at other times we may walk away thinking that communication was completely successful, when in fact it was not. Still, at other times, it is plainly clear that a "clash" has occurred but we are often left wondering why, and sometimes we then attribute negative characteristics to the other person based on our interactions (see Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, for a broader discussion about how we perceive communicative interactions). This varying degree of awareness is due to culturally defined expectations for appropriate behavior. When expectations are violated, a lack of understanding of the role of culture in our interactions causes confusion and conflict. Brislin (1999) referred to this as a "well-meaning culture clash" – no one is mal-intentioned about the conflict in interactions, just ignorant of the other's cultural expectations. From my perspective, this lack of understanding and conflict occurs more frequently in closer relationships, when people interact regularly and at more intimate levels.

Another observation from my personal relationships is that most of these culture clashes that can cause conflict in relationships often occur over relatively unimportant matters. The different ways of doing things or thinking about things rarely impose hardships or compromises in integrity for one another. For example, I come from a cultural background that tends to favor direct and explicit communication patterns, whereas I have had partners whose backgrounds dictate that the meaning of communications is often embedded in the context shared among individuals. This has been referred to as high- vs. low-context communication style and is usually correlated with the cultural domain of collectivism/individualism (Hofstede, 1997). Individuals who are from high-context backgrounds will often provide longer stories when explaining events in order to describe the broader context. This can appear to those of us who come from low-context backgrounds to be long-winded

unwieldy accounts of events and can lead to impatience and questions interjected in the middle of the story asking about the point of the story. Although such incidents can be frustrating for those used to a more direct communication style, that person can choose to respond in either positive or negative ways. For example, he can effectively end the communication of his partner by asking her to “get to the point,” perhaps offending the other person. Or he can choose to listen to, and even enjoy, the other person’s story. In recognizing that culture clashes do not need to result in negative outcomes, individuals can choose to see diversity as interesting and choose to celebrate it rather than allowing frustration over different ways of doing and knowing to cause friction in the relationship. Similarly, interactions between teachers and students, and educators and parents, who come from different cultural backgrounds can be seen as frustrating endeavors, or as positive learning experiences. By recognizing how culture influences our interactions, we can choose to explore differences and make choices not to attribute negative qualities to people who violate our own cultural expectations.

## **Being challenged through educational opportunities**

My understanding of group differences came about because of many fortuitous experiences interacting with others, many of which were directly tied to my formal education. Some experiences were offered through the university experience in general, while others can be directly attributed to specific course and program challenges.

### **Early college experiences**

For my undergraduate degree, I received a broad liberal arts education, taking courses from Greek civilization to sociological perspectives on Mexico, in addition to the English courses required of my major. I also lived in the biggest dorm in North America, Jester Dormitory, living on a co-ed floor with students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. In addition, I joined a co-ed service fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega, and became “brothers” with students from diverse backgrounds. I believe all of these experiences greatly influenced my views on diversity in a positive way. Another big influence on me during this time was my experience at the university

Catholic center. Although not Catholic at the time, I went with friends and was moved by the emphasis on social justice. The tenet of caring for the “least among us” became real to me as I had more and more experiences with those who were less fortunate than I, including visiting two elderly women with intellectual deficits at the Austin State School on a weekly basis. In a very real sense, as I struggled with my own personal difficulties over several years, I realized that sometimes I was in that class of “least among us,” leading me to a greater understanding of community. I came to better understand the commonalities of all groups of people.

During my time in Austin, I heard many important figures speak of social justice. Caesar Chavez spoke of the plight of immigrants and migrant workers, struggling to get their basic needs met, including access to food and clean water, safe and healthy working environments, and basic health care. Jessie Jackson spoke of the need to conserve what is good about our political and social systems, but also the need to change those parts of our systems that inhibited civil and human rights. Mickey Leland, the late Congressman from Houston, also made an impact by engaging a group of students in discussion about race and social injustice. More than anyone, however, the priests at the center made the greatest impression on me by speaking regularly about the Christian values of caring for one another and especially those who need the most help, including the poor. I was also greatly moved by the story of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in El Salvador while giving mass in 1980. As a member of a religious network formed to educate about the injustices being committed in Central America during the 1980s, I attended several celebrations of the legacy of Archbishop Romero. A relatively low-key priest, then Bishop, it was surmised that he was chosen as Archbishop because he would be inconspicuous and non-confrontational from the pulpit (Closkey & Hogan, 2012). To the contrary, Archbishop Romero spoke eloquently and forcefully about the gospel and the divine call to care for the poor and others considered the least among us (Romero, 2004). He was gunned down because he was thought to be a threat to the government. These learning experiences about social justice significantly shaped my perspective on cultural differences and the need for justice for all peoples.

## **Ph.D. experiences**

At the end of my five-year tenure teaching in K-12 schools, I decided to return to school full time to work on my Ph.D. A number of experiences over the next five years influenced my perspective on diversity and multicultural education.

## **Mentors**

First and foremost, I was influenced by my experience working with Shernaz García (my dissertation chair) and Alba Ortiz, faculty in the Bilingual Special Education program at U.T. Austin, as a student and teaching/graduate research assistant. I remember both challenging me to think in broader and more complex ways in conceptualizing the barriers faced by marginalized groups of students and how to provide culturally responsive assessment and instruction. As anyone who has gone through a doctoral program can attest, the intense nature of such programs can lead to lifelong relationships with one's major professors. Those relationships change over time as students progress from novices to graduates, then colleagues. I know I would not be where I am today without their mentoring and support through the years.

## **CEC multicultural symposium**

Another experience that stands out during this time was attending an all-day Multicultural Symposium at the Council for Exceptional Children annual convention on the education of African American children. This was a powerful experience that greatly influenced my thinking about educating children from nonmainstream cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The presenters included young, dynamic academicians like James Patton, Ken Dickson, Stanley Trent, Bridgie Alexis Ford, and Festus Obiakor. I remember taking copious notes and leaving at the end of the day with adrenaline pumping and a million ideas running through my brain and thinking I had found my niche in my profession. I spent the rest of the semester writing a reflective journal as one of my course projects and using this experience as the jumping off point for my reflections.

## **What's your cultural background Steve?**

One evening, early in my doctoral program, the students in Jim Scheurich's "Intro to Systems of Human Inquiry" were discussing respective cultural backgrounds. After I responded to a fellow student, someone asked, "Well tell us about *your* cultural background Steve." I remember hemming and hawing, struggling to answer the question, and being surprised that I could not answer it. Finally, I said, "Well my family used to sit around and watch football and

we would get together with the extended family on Thanksgiving.” It dawned on me that I had not really been challenged to understand my own cultural background. I had some pretty good thoughts about other cultural groups, but not my own. It was at this point that I began to realize that my perspective about culture was that it was something that “other” people had, and that I really looked at the world through a very ethnocentric lens. I have also come to realize that when this is the case, people tend to view their cultural ways as the norm and others’ ways as different. But not different as in, “Let’s celebrate diversity!” but different as deviant and questionable. This began a long journey of self-reflection about the purpose of culture in societies, its role in shaping ways of knowing and doing and in creating value systems, and the place of cultural critique in society. Scheurich’s article, *Toward a White Discourse on White Racism* (Scheurich, 1993), about his observations on White privilege and power also opened my eyes to systemic racism in U.S. institutions and influenced how I saw my place in relation to other groups in U.S. society.

## Literature

My readings during graduate school also greatly influenced me. Of note are the works of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Lisa Delpit, and Patricia Greenfield. Ladson-Billings’s 1994 book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children*, was remarkable to me in the way she integrated her personal life story with her academic understanding and research. It created in me a deeper understanding of the experiences of at least one African American woman. Delpit’s book, *Other People’s Children* (Delpit, 1995), in particular her chapter on language, was equally powerful in the way she provided real-life examples from the literature that illustrated the capabilities of children from different cultural/linguistic backgrounds and the barriers educators often impose on language development by not understanding those competencies. The work of Patricia Greenfield and her colleagues at UCLA (1995) likewise had a big impact on how I saw cultural difference in the classroom. In one of their studies, they documented the interactions between Latino children and Anglo teachers, describing real-life interactions and explaining how the cultural mores illustrated in these interactions influenced the education of children from nonmainstream backgrounds (Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Trumbull, 1999). Each of these writings opened my eyes to see teaching and learning in different ways.

### **Dissertation and diversity project**

My perspectives about diversity were also defined by my experiences working on two different projects at about the same time – a diversity project at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) and my dissertation research. The diversity project was headed by Pat Guerra, with whom I had numerous conversations about diversity in education and from whom I learned a great deal about preparing teachers to be more culturally responsive. For my dissertation, I studied White teachers who had a history of success in teaching CLD children. I learned so much in my conversations with the teachers in my study – about how others viewed multicultural education, and about myself as I reflected on my own evolving views.

## **Reflections for teacher preparation**

My viewpoints about diversity and multicultural education have evolved and will continue to evolve until the day I die. New experiences provide new insights. At some point in my adulthood, I was surprised when I would have another “aha” moment; now I expect them. Reflections about lessons learned as they pertain to teacher preparation follow.

### **Cultural differences influence educational outcomes**

Culture influences how we think and how we interact in our society. Real differences exist in how groups of people perceive their world and interact in it, and this necessarily influences classroom interactions and interactions between educators and parents. As cultural norms are passed down from adults to children and children become socialized within their cultural group, their ways of knowing and doing become internalized and appear as “normal” and expected ways of knowing and doing. Interactions with other individuals who are equally sure about their expected norms of thinking and behaving can lead to cultural clashes when expectations are violated (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). The attributions we then make about others and their differences can lead to a lack of trust and influence perspectives and interactions in the classroom. In addition, when one group traditionally has greater status, interactions tend to favor the group with greater status.

Unfortunately, these differences are typically difficult to document using traditional educational research. Rothstein-Fisch et al. (1999) demonstrated that

a study well-grounded in theory and with a strong research design can provide insights into cultural differences in the classroom. These studies tend to be ethnographic and require observation over a period of time before repercussions of culture clashes are fully realized. Teacher preparation can provide students with multiple opportunities through observation and scenario to consider how cultural differences influence teaching and learning in the classroom.

## **It is impossible not to have biases**

Because culture provides boundaries for what is considered normal and appropriate, and because everyone grows up in a cultural group, it is impossible not to have biases. In fact, it is normal human behavior to develop value systems where some ways of knowing and doing are valued over others. Culture helps us to define our belief systems. In addition, as part of typical cognitive development, we categorize our perspectives in meaningful ways. Although many people want to believe they are color-blind when it comes to diversity, it is simply not possible to have no biases about expected ways of thinking and behaving. Because of this, I believe the goal for society should not be to necessarily eliminate biases, but to become *aware* of our biases in our interactions with others. When we are able to reflect on these biases and prejudices, and see the perspective of others, we can then choose to make decisions about how we will respond to these differences in such a way that our own behaviors do not discriminate against others from different cultural backgrounds. Teacher preparation can give students opportunities to reflect on their own cultural background, especially in relation to the backgrounds of others. Recognizing differences from a non-normative perspective is essential for teachers to understand the dynamics taking place in interactions with culturally different students and to respond appropriately.

## **Safe spaces and interactions with cultural others make understanding possible**

Hearing others' viewpoints and believing their experiences makes understanding of others possible. Without interactions with cultural others, there is no opportunity for this kind of understanding. Beth Harry and colleagues (Harry, Torguson, Guerrero, & Katkavitch, 1993) described a higher education classroom assignment where students were asked to select a parent from a cultural background different from their own and conduct interviews to better understand that parent's perspective. The feedback from her students was



overwhelmingly positive as they came to see another's cultural perspective in new and positive ways. It was also clear from this article that developing relationships was key in creating positive perspectives about teacher/parent interactions. Interacting effectively with others creates space to become aware of our biases and to consciously choose not to discriminate. Oftentimes, how we learn about others comes after a cultural clash has occurred and we have to reconcile differences that have become apparent after conflict. Ideally, we want our students, both in EC-12 and higher education classrooms, to have safe spaces to explore differences. Activities such as the one provided by Harry et al. (1993) are ideal because the instructor can scaffold the desired experience. Too often in society, a failure to provide opportunities for these discussions leads to internalizing biases. Overt racism becomes covert racism, and without a better understanding of the other's belief system, behaviors that are discriminatory are much more likely to occur. Safe spaces must be created to increase intercultural interactions.

### **Early experiences with diversity provide a foundation**

I attribute much of my perspective about diversity and multiculturalism to early experiences of interacting with cultural others. Exposure at an early age is essential if we want our children to grow up with a better understanding of differences and to not be afraid of them. Providing these opportunities in safe spaces should be a part of our curriculum from day one in schools. My brother-in-law was born with multiple and severe disabilities. Although he did not have intellectual deficits, he looked and sounded different. His sister recalls numerous times while growing up when other children made derogatory comments about him. We have had discussions about whether or not these other children developed their negative perspectives about someone like her brother because of seeing such behavior in others, or if that was just a part of their nature. I surmise that it involves different aspects of growing up in a society, including the fact that it may be normal behavior to be afraid of the unknown. Given the opportunity at early ages to get to know children who are different and to actually develop a relationship with them would make a big difference in how children see the other. Fortunately, teachers have at their disposal myriad resources through a variety of technology. Many organizations provide materials and experiences for instruction that can be used in the classroom to teach students to view differences in a positive light. Teacher preparation programs can expose students to these materials and share models of integration, regardless of the kind of child difference.

## High expectations are essential

There is probably not a larger set of data on any topic in education as there is on the topic of low teacher expectations and how that affects teaching in the classroom. The results are clear that when teachers develop low expectations for children, they teach them differently and hold them to lower standards, rarely raising the bar of achievement (Good, 1987). This has been demonstrated over several decades for a variety of groups, including children from different cultural backgrounds and children with disabilities. Empowerment models of education can help CLD students (Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999). One reality that may lead to some teachers developing low expectations is that some children do not come to school with the preliteracy skills expected by today's schools. Given a lack of exposure of some children to print readiness and traditional topic-centered narratives, these students are often at a disadvantage when faced with a curriculum that expects such readiness and prior experience.

Poverty is one area of societal influence that impacts students' classroom readiness. However, blanket predictions about children who come from poor backgrounds have devastating effects on the teaching/learning environment (Valencia, 1997). Luis Moll and colleagues (Moll, Amanti, & Neff, 1992) documented vast funds of knowledge and social networks that poor children bring to the classroom that can help in debunking the thinking that "poor children bring nothing to the table; how am I supposed to teach them?" There is no doubt that poverty brings with it a lack of resources at the individual and neighborhood levels of schooling. Society must address these issues of inequity. However, to use it as an excuse not to teach creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. When students come to school without the prerequisite knowledge in specific areas, it is incumbent on teachers to assess student readiness and teach those prerequisites so that students can be fully engaged in the learning process of the classroom. Teacher preparation programs should fully explain the teacher expectancy literature to pre-service teachers and provide opportunities for success with low achieving students. For this success to occur, pre-service teachers must be taught how to respond appropriately to the needs of their students.

## Parents care about their children's future and education

One enduring message I have often heard as an EC-12 educator and an educator in higher education is that parents are often the problem in terms of poor educational results. I have no doubt that at one time or another I have espoused the same viewpoint as an educator. The message always comes with great

frustration and the sense that educators are at a loss as to how to do things differently to be successful with one or more students. It also comes, I believe, with frustrations from specific interactions with a handful of parents. I typically don't preach to my students in higher education, but try to provide experiences for them to come to their own conclusions. However, this is a topic where I sometimes find myself on my soapbox because I want to leave a lasting impression about their interactions with parents. From my perspective, based on my experiences and observations over the years, the overwhelming majority of parents care deeply about the education and future of their children. Having worked with children with emotional and behavioral problems, many parents of my children also struggled in their lives. As I got to know them through our various interactions, these parents conveyed a great desire to see their children succeed in school and in life. Although some were limited in education, finances, and sometimes emotional stability, most of the parents with whom I worked tried to put their children in positive places so they could be successful.

I understand the frustration of teachers as they are regularly criticized by different circles in society, and I also understand the tendency to point fingers when results are not what we would like. But, I always challenge my students to resist the temptation to make overgeneralizations about individual negative experiences with parents. Of course there are some parents who are so dysfunctional that they cannot be good parents, but to suggest that a large percentage of parents are to blame for poor educational outcomes serves no good purpose and is just not true. In fact, it leads to the negative spiral of low teacher expectations described above. The role of teacher educators is to provide opportunities to interact with diverse parents in supervised and reflective places during students' teacher preparation training. Discussions with parents, parent interviews, individual reflection, and group discussion can all be powerful tools in helping pre-service teachers better understand the perspectives, life demands, and needs of parents.

## **Reflection and humility create open spaces for learning**

My final observation is that reflection and humility are necessary to be a good teacher. Reflection helps us to step back and consider things differently away from the emotions of the day. It also helps us to consider the perspectives of others. Humility helps us to keep our biases in check and to make better decisions as we recognize those biases. It also helps us to learn from our students and others. I have heard some White educators talk about their efforts to help CLD children in almost messianic tones. I do not see myself in this light.

Recognizing that we have just as much to learn from those we teach as they have to learn from us, gives us the perspective of life-long learners, which is a true gift in the field of education.

## Conclusion

I have seen programs that teach about diversity begin with the tenet that teachers must better understand the cultures of their students. Although this is essential, I believe it is necessary that teachers learn about their own cultural background first. If we never move beyond the perspective that our cultural ways of knowing and doing are the normative experience, we will never be able to make sense of our children's differences. In addition, Whites who understand systemic racism and White privilege need to take responsibility for educating other Whites in an attempt to change inequitable power structures in our society. All too often well-intentioned White educators believe their primary responsibility is to "save" children of color who are at a disadvantage. This savior mentality tends to ignore the broader problems of societal systems that continue ongoing inequity for children of color. Changing others' perspectives is difficult, to be sure, but is necessary if substantial change is to take place.

I attribute my understanding of cultural differences and multicultural education to my life experiences, some of which I have stumbled upon, and others that I have chosen. I have been fortunate to have had so many positive experiences with people from different cultural backgrounds and that I have had good mentors in my life. I want to thank the editors of *MLT* for providing the opportunity to share my experiences. It is easy in today's society to shy away from such controversial topics; it is in sharing with one another in open discussion that we can reflect and learn at greater levels and make a difference in providing culturally responsive education for all children.

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