

## Those Who Can, Teach: Reflections on Teaching Diverse Populations

By Vivian Fueyo with Stephanie Bechtol

Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake.

But we aren't afraid. We know the guy with the crooked eye is Davey, the Baby's brother, and the tall one next to him in the straw brim, that's Rosa's Eddie V., and the big one that looks like a dumb grown man, he's Fat Boy, though he's not fat anymore nor a boy.

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All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes. (Cisneros, 1989, p. 28)

Teachers in the United States are working in far more heterogeneous classrooms than ever before. Rapid changes in the nature of the United States school population are bringing to the classroom more students with limited-English proficiency and more immigrants with a wide variety of school preparation (Cohen, 1994; Villegas, 1992). Tragically,

school failure among linguistically and culturally diverse students seems to be paralleling this increased heterogeneity (Goldenberg, 1996). For example, Hispanics are far more likely to drop out of school than are members of any other ethnic group, with an estimated 40 percent of Hispanic students leaving high school before the spring of their sophomore years (McKay, 1988). Equally tragic is the continuation of differential levels of achievement between European-American and African-American students in the public schools (Irvine, 1990; Ptak, 1988). These trends present a significant challenge to the next generation of teachers and to those responsible for their training (Dilworth, 1992; O'Hair & Odell, 1993; Zeichner, 1993).

If current demographic trends hold, the student population will become increasingly linguistically and ethnically diverse, while the teaching population remains predominantly European American, monolingual, and mostly female (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1995; Gay, 1993). For purposes of this paper, we will use Kenneth M. Zeichner's (1993) definitions of the terms diversity and diverse learners: "differences [between the teachers and students] related to social class, ethnicity, culture, and language" (p. 1). African Americans, the second largest ethnic group among teachers, comprise 7 percent of all public school teachers in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1996). Presently only 3 percent of all teachers in the United States are Hispanic with about 64 Hispanic students for every Hispanic teacher (de la Rosa, Maw & Yzaguirre, 1990; Jiménez, Gersten, & Rivera, 1996).

Concerns exist in the teacher education literature that the stable demographics of those going into teaching and the increasing diversity of those whom they will be teaching is a chronic problem (Haberman, 1996; Larkin & Sleeter, 1995). Some suggest that teachers of linguistically and culturally diverse children should be selected from the same racial, ethnic, or linguistic group as the children being taught. Proponents contend that teachers who are "matched" with their students could provide positive role models, encourage children to perform better, and understand and counsel children better (Arends, Clemson, & Henkelman, 1992; Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Martin Haberman (1996) cautions against simplistic ethnic or racial matching of teachers to their students. He advocates instead recruiting teachers who have lived through similar life experiences of poverty and violence as the urban children they plan to teach. These views are not universally held.

"Whether teachers' race and ethnicity affect student achievement remains an open question" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 26). Investigators have failed to find empirically valid connections between teacher race-ethnicity and student achievement (Jiménez, et al., 1996; King, 1993; Nieto, 1992; Schumann, 1992). As a result, there appears to be widespread agreement that lack of empirical evidence in this area permits us to focus on holding all teachers accountable for teaching all students (Irvine, 1990, 1992; King, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). Further, when investigators focus on identifying the behaviors and attitudes of successful teachers of diverse learners, their findings are consistent with assumptions about the positive

effects of education and teacher training. In fact, evidence exists that matching teachers and students by race and ethnicity may have a negative effect on student achievement. Teachers of the same ethnic group but from a different socioeconomic background may be less sensitive and more demanding of children, perceiving them as lacking in ability or motivation (Carter, 1971; MacDonald, 1996).

While current efforts to increase diversity among teachers are laudable and worth continuing, no empirical evidence exists that linguistically and culturally diverse students learn better when taught by teachers of similar ethnicity, race, or life experience (King, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1992). For purposes of argument let me suggest that positing race, ethnicity, and life experience as necessary and sufficient conditions for teaching diverse learners is similar to arguing that motherhood is a necessary and sufficient condition for practicing obstetrics. While I acknowledge that diverse learners are failing to succeed in American classrooms, teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and classroom practices appear more relevant variables for student success (Garcia, 1996; Irvine, 1992; Jiménez, et al., 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994). When teachers resolve "to help students succeed, and...use a variety of strategies to reach this goal" (Nieto, 1992, p. 242), the unfamiliar becomes familiar. "All brown all around, we are safe" (Cisneros, 1987, p. 28).

### Teacher Effectiveness in a Multicultural Context

Shifting emphasis away from the race and ethnicity of the teachers in relationship to their students permits us to focus on those variables found to correlate with effective teaching of diverse learners. Effective teachers of racially, ethno-linguistically diverse students share characteristics and teacher behaviors with all other effective teachers: they are competent in subject matter; they communicate clearly when giving directions, specifying tasks, and providing new information; they pace instruction appropriately; they provide all students with access to high-status knowledge; they specify task outcomes and what students must do to accomplish the tasks; they regularly monitor student progress; they stress problem solving and critical thinking; they have appropriately high standards and expectations for their students; they build on existing student knowledge; they promote active student involvement; and they provide immediate feedback on students' success whenever required (Brophy, 1982; Garcia, 1996; Irvine, 1992; Schumann, 1992).

In addition to these shared characteristics, the teachers of diverse learners also use the students' everyday experiences to link new concepts to prior knowledge and culture (Garcia & McLaughlin, 1995; Milk, Mercado, & Sapiens, 1992), accept and build on students' ideas and language (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Palincsar, 1996), and employ interactive methods (Jiménez et al., 1996; Tikunoff, 1983). Interactive methods include: involving small groups of students on assigned academic tasks with intermittent assistance by the teacher (Cohen, 1994), encour-

aging student-student discourse following the teacher's instructional initiation (Jiménez et al., 1996), and encouraging students to learn collaboratively, not necessarily in cooperative groups (Garcia, 1996).

Although Jacqueline J. Irvine (1992) and others (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1995; Gersten & Jiménez, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1995) call for continued research on teaching practices for diverse students, the existing research on effective teaching provides a useful framework for instruction. Successful teachers of diverse learners share common attitudes, knowledge, and classroom practices (Garcia, 1996; Larkin & Sleeter, 1995; Milk et al., 1992). As a group, these successful teachers are bound not by secret knowledge or exclusive pedagogy but by a clear focus on helping students achieve. In embracing this focus, they share a commitment to the flexibility and perseverance it requires. Asa G. Hilliard (1988, p. 201) asserts that successful teachers of urban, multicultural students do not possess special pedagogical skills. Rather, urban, multicultural students fail because they have not been provided "appropriate regular pedagogy." They fail because they have not been taught.

For this critical lack of focus on student achievement for diverse learners, some have faulted inadequate teacher preparation (Larkin & Sleeter, 1995; Zeichner, 1993), lowered teacher expectations (Brophy & Good, 1970; Rueda & Garcia, 1996), or other perceived differences between teachers and students (Haberman, 1992, 1996; Weinstein, 1989).

### Teacher Expectations and Achievement in a Multicultural Context

Robert Rueda and Eugene E. Garcia (1996) investigated teachers' belief systems and how they affected classroom practice, particularly on views of linguistic diversity in the classroom. They investigated the "teachers' perspectives on three areas relevant to the education of language minority students (value of bilingualism, reading-related instructional models and practices, and reading related assessment)" (p. 316). In classrooms with chronically low levels of student language use, they found evidence of teacher beliefs and practices at odds with current views of literacy instruction and assessment. Teachers with negative perspectives:

...tended to discourage use of primary language, rarely or never [sic] included bilingual materials in classroom activities...[teachers held views of] reading emphasizing...form over function, and the segmentation of learning into discrete skills or parts...[teachers held views of assessment] as the evaluation of discrete products of learning, with minimal or no attention to context or other sociocultural features. (pp. 319-320)

Similar negative results on student performance have been reported when teachers' beliefs and classroom practices result in the differential treatment of students because of gender differences (AAUW, 1992), stereotypical views of surnames (Demetrulius, 1991), or insular life experiences (Noel, 1995; Tran,

Young, & Di Lella, 1994). Correlations between teachers' expectations and student achievement are familiar and well documented (Brophy & Good, 1970; Dusek & Josef, 1983; Good & Weinstein, 1986). What appears to be different among contemporary researchers is a heightened understanding of teachers' expectations and instructional effectiveness in an increasingly diverse cultural context.

Teacher expectations for instructional effectiveness in a multicultural society include: "having a positive orientation to working in culturally diverse settings" (Larkin & Sleeter, 1995), "respecting cultural differences" (Rodriguez & Sjoström, 1995), and "respecting diversity" (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). This desirable quality in teachers has been variously labeled "culturally aware" (Arends, et al., 1992), "culturally competent" (Haberman, 1996), "culturally relevant" (Ladson-Billings, 1995), or "culturally responsive" (Villegas, 1991). Regardless of the label, all of the preceding comprise four common elements: (1) rejecting deficit paradigms that prevail in the literature about the cultural, linguistic, or racial backgrounds of the students in comparison to other students (Ladson-Billings, 1995); (2) knowledge of the interaction of the students' culture and the prevailing school culture (Saracho & Spodek, 1995); (3) incorporating the contributions of the students' culture into the curriculum (Sleeter, 1995); and (4) modifying instruction to facilitate academic achievement among students from diverse groups (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Accepting student failure is not an option for culturally relevant teachers. Instead, they create social interactions between students to help them meet the criteria for academic success. Culturally relevant teachers encourage students to be responsible for the academic success of others. They teach students how to be successful learners. They reject deficit notions about the students' language and family backgrounds. Culturally relevant teachers use strategies that teach students how to be successful learners consistent with the view that the teachers hold for them.

More than simply holding high expectations for their students, successful teachers of diverse learners actively reject the notion of student failure. They share a belief in common about the educability of the students. They reject notions that blame the children for their failure to learn, or attribute student failure to the economic, racial, or linguistic background of their families. Instead, successful teachers of diverse students accept responsibility for teaching their students and for providing them with the information and skills they needed. They hold their students accountable for their own learning. These "culturally competent" teachers represent the desirable qualities in any teacher for meeting the needs of diverse learners. As models for future teachers, they present a worthy challenge.

### Self-Examination Among Prospective Teachers

Current understanding of the changing nature of the student population, the decreasing achievement among diverse learners, the stable demographics of the

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teaching force, and the growing contrast between these factors, hold important implications for the preparation of future teachers (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1995; Garcia, 1994; Haberman, 1994). Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests a critical framework for examining teacher preparation programs for meeting the needs of diverse learners. Does the curriculum teach prospective teachers about the nature of student-teacher relationships, the curriculum, schooling, and society? I suggest that the self-examination called for by Edward R. Ducharme and Mary K. Ducharme (1995) and others (Haberman, 1996; Larkin & Sleeter, 1995; Zeichner, 1993) is a promising vehicle for ensuring among prospective teachers this moral “plumb line” represented by Ladson-Billings’ (1995) curriculum. Garcia and Barry McLaughlin (1995) refer to it as “teacher proficiency:”

[It] is based on an understanding of children, their language, their culture, and their values. Teacher proficiency is based also on the teachers’ responses to their students [and an understanding of the effects those responses will have on the children they teach.] All of these facets of teaching need to be considered in preparing prospective teachers. (p. 135)

As teacher education continues to strive for the laudable goals of increased diversity among teachers for America’s students, it remains equally important for the profession to remain focused on preparing well all its future teachers. Regardless of their own life experiences, all teachers must be prepared to help every student learn. Regardless of ethnicity or language, when beginning teachers are well prepared, concerns about teaching only as they were taught are groundless.

Stephanie, one of the students in our teacher preparation program, included the following essay in one of her written comprehensive examination questions. I found it so compelling, that I asked her if I could include it in this article. Join me in following Stephanie through her journey in defining herself as a teacher. She is a thoughtful beginning teacher, focused on student learning, reflecting on teaching and learning, respecting and valuing diversity, and knowledgeable in practices and strategies for melding these into one. Her voice, and others like hers, of European-American, monolingual, female teachers, often remains unheard. I believe hers is precisely the self-examination we need from teachers of diverse learners. It is a voice we need to hear.

### A Beginning Teacher’s Reflection on Teaching Diverse Learners

Last semester, I took an inclusion class. During one class session we had a guest. She was a second grader who was placed in a local “regular” education classroom. She came to our class with her grandmother, who was fluent in sign language. While the grandmother translated, the second grader told of how she had only one friend in the school and how isolated she felt. The teacher had not made any effort to include this girl into the classroom, nor had she made any attempt to learn sign language. Her one friend at the school was the only person who made any

attempt at communication. Her education was placed in the hands of the special education teacher, with whom she spent 90 minutes each day. She spent her lunch hour in silence. Most of my peers in the teacher preparation program were very disturbed by this story. I kept saying to myself, "What kind of teacher is she?" Now, I realize that she is the kind of teacher about which the books on multicultural education are being written. I guess some people just don't think.

I use the above example because I feel that it can best illustrate how I would view a child who has not mastered the English language. If a child is ignored because of something that cannot be controlled, what will become of that child? What has any child done to deserve a lesser education because of disability, or skin color, or language? Although speaking a language other than English is not a disability, there is a stigma attached that can be just as alienating. As teachers, it is our responsibility to break the communication barriers, not only to ensure true learning, but to help with the socialization and acceptance of each child. I truly believe that if my students are not participating members of the class, it is nobody's fault but mine. No excuses!

It is important in dealing with multicultural or non-English speaking students to prioritize the objectives of the curriculum. If the teacher's curriculum goals were to mold his or her students into the stereotypical view of the "ideal" American child, they would rob the students of the kind of personal enrichment, engagement, and wonderment that sparks the work of great minds. In contrast, if teachers wanted to ensure real learning, they would engage the students in active discussions and experiences using their own cultural background and language.

My own father had a passion for boats beginning in early childhood. He spent his summer days sailing through the canals of Holland dreaming of his future days at sea. By the age of ten my father had designed his own sailboat. That same year, he and his family sailed to America to live the "American dream." Unfortunately, the dream faded and my father struggled to make his way in this new world. All of what he knew had changed, except his love for sailboats.

By the time my father was in high school, he had built his own sailboat and worked part-time for a local boat manufacturer. My father's school days were spent completing mediocre work, daydreaming about his future, and drawing design after design of sailboats. His English teacher, Mr. P, to become my English teacher nearly twenty years later, repeatedly told my father that he was wasting his time. What Mr. P did not know was that my father may have omitted reading the classics, but he was enthralled with books about yachts, yachters, and faraway places. You can imagine my pride when I told Mr. P that my dad was a huge success designing, building, restoring, and repairing boats in his own yacht yard. Mr. P said, "Oh."

I am relating all of this about my dad, not because I think you have any great interest in the history of my family, but because I think it illustrates the one-sidedness and intolerance for people who do not fit stereotypical images. So many of my dad's early experiences in this country were filled with ridicule about his

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language and his lifestyle. Few people saw that underneath his funny pronunciation of words was a mind filled with purpose, ideas, drive and brilliance. I'm sure that we can all think of some unique ways that Mr. P could have incorporated my dad's interest in boats into his English curriculum. Fortunately, my dad had a dream and was self-motivated in full-filling that dream. Unfortunately, few people, especially teachers, supported him as the bright, capable person he would prove himself to be.

In my opinion, learning is about expression—each person expressing his ideas, beliefs, feelings and hypotheses in order to arrive at a goal or purpose. As a teacher, my goal is for each of my students to find their own meaning. For individuals to find their own meaning they must pull from their own background and experiences. Of course, I could stand at the front of the room and try to explain concepts based on my own understanding, but how would that be relevant to my students. They have not seen what I have seen, they have not heard what I have heard, they have not lived through what I have lived. What makes me think that they will understand the way I do? One thing I know deep inside is that if I have high expectations for each of my students and I give them the chance and the tools for success, they will learn. They will find their own meaning.

I recently saw a T-shirt that said, "It's about character—not color." The T-shirt, of course, was referring to racial differences, but I think it said a lot about any differences. Teachers have a responsibility to look beyond the obvious and superficial and find the potential in each child.

## Implications for Teacher Educators

Teacher educators have a concomitant responsibility to look beyond the obvious and superficial and find the potential in every prospective teacher. Regardless of prospective teachers' race, ethnicity, or life experiences, their teacher preparation curricula should include: (1) an understanding of the nature of student-teacher relationships, the curriculum, schooling, and society; (2) active self-examination; (3) teaching strategies that model active, meaningful, and ethno-linguistically appropriate student involvement; and (4) practices that communicate high expectations for all learners, actively rejecting any notions of student failure. In Stephanie's words, "No excuses!"

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