

Multicultural Teacher Introspection

By Nitza M. Hidalgo

Many educators around the country are interested in developing a multicultural approach in their teaching. They find themselves in classroom with 25 children of varying racial and cultural backgrounds and are looking for ways to connect what they do in the classroom to the cultures represented by their students. Before we can begin to understand others, however, we need to understand ourselves and what we bring to our interactions with others. For this reason, it is important for teachers interested in learning more about other cultural groups to first look inward.

The initial step in the process involves introspection. Teachers need to ask themselves some fundamental questions: What framework do we bring into the classroom? How does our cultural perspective color our view of the worlds? Posing these questions helps teachers analyze the deep-rooted cultural features of their backgrounds. Teachers may thus begin the process of understanding how our beliefs and behaviors are culturally based and how our system of beliefs is similar to or different from our students' beliefs.

Many teachers may not be accustomed to thinking of ourselves as cultural or ethnic. This experience is likely rooted in our training and socialization, both direct and indirect, which have been monocultural in nature. The mainstream perspective presented through schooling is really an Anglo-European perspective this becoming an educated "American" implicitly means becoming Anglicized.¹

Until recently, schooling in general did not include much information about the experiences of racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Different perspectives were marginalized, often presented as attachments to the main orientation, especially in the area of curriculum. Most practicing teachers have not been exposed to a multicultural knowledge base. When teachers were presented information about racial or ethnic groups, the mainstream perspective was typically used to evaluate the information. It was the filter through which information about diverse populations was interpreted.

Not only has the framework for interpretation of knowledge been monocultural – that is, Anglo-European – but variations have been judged to be less valuable. When African-Americans were mentioned, the deficit model came into play. That model viewed racial and ethnic differences as deficient, or

lacking.² Children of color were implicitly judged deficient because they did not bring to school the same majority culture represented in the school and classrooms. Without realizing it, teachers learned mainstream or “whiteness” to be the norm by which all knowledge about others was measured within schooling.

Adoption of this mainstream perspective reinforces a lack of ethnic consciousness among a good many classroom teachers. Thus, schooling does not require us to think of ourselves as ethnic and may in fact minimize ethnic awareness in favor of Americanization.

The irony is that each of us has been socialized in some culture, and often more than one culture. Our culture provides a lens through which we view the world and interpret our everyday experiences.³ Culture informs what we see and understand, as well as what we omit and misconstrue. Many components make up our view of the world: our ethnic and racial identification, the region of the country we come from, the type of neighborhood we live in, our socioeconomic background, our gender, the language(s) we speak, our disabilities, our past experiences, and our life-style. We need to think about the ways in which these parts of us define our perspectives.

We may think about culture as existing on at least three levels: the symbolic, the behavioral, and the concrete.⁴ Our values and beliefs lie on the symbolic level. How we ascribe meaning to our experiences depends on the values we hold and the beliefs that we may have. This level is the most abstract and difficult to articulate, yet it is essential to our interpretation of the world.

This level of culture is implicit and shared by others within our reference group. Our values and beliefs help us to interpret our experiences and shape socially appropriate behavior. For example, the definition of family may vary from one cultural group to another, depending on the importance the group places on family cohesiveness. The Puerto Rican concept of family may go beyond the extended family to kinlike relations with friends (*compadres/comadres*), while the U.S. American definition of family may include only the nuclear family living at home.⁵

The behavioral level refers to how we define our social roles, the languages(s) we speak, the rituals we practice, and the form taken by our nonverbal communication. Our behavior reflects our values. The roles we ascribe to women and men within U.S. culture are different from the gender roles of other cultures. Even within our culture, for instance, the role of women has undergone subtle modifications because of the women’s movement. These role ascriptions are based on our beliefs, as a society, about the importance of women’s work and their contribution to the household. In response, men have also had to redefine their roles within various situations as evidenced by the development of parenting, rather than solely maternity, leave policies.

Also on the behavioral level, language mirrors thought: our language reflects our beliefs and values. Think about the associations we make with simple words like black and white. Is it sheer coincidence that we can generate many

negative connotations for the word black and many positive connotations for the word white? Regarding language, the feminist movement has worked to eliminate commonplace correlations such as men and girls (versus men and women) because of the inequality inherent in this type of comparison. These are subtle distinctions that have profound effects on our thinking.

Educators often begin to think about multiculturalism at the concrete level, yet movement to a more abstract understanding is needed. The concrete culture is the most visible and tangible level. The products of culture, such as our cultural artifacts, exist at this level. Technology, music, foods, and artistic works and materials are the concrete, visible elements of culture. This is what is most often interpreted as “the culture” of ethnic groups. School festivals highlighting ethnic foods, flag displays from different countries, performance of ethnic music, and playing international games tend to result in a superficial and exotic impression of multiculturalism. This would be comparable to French students expecting to learn about U.S. culture by studying our ritual practices on the Fourth of July. Knowing about barbecues and fireworks displays tells French students little about the meaning Independence Day has in our nation. Foods, holidays, games, and artifacts reveal little about how ethnic groups experience and make meaning of the world.

Given this definition of culture, we can begin to explore how our own cultural perspectives shape our thinking and actions. In order to answer eventually the broad question of how our cultural perspective influences our work in the classroom, we begin with specific introspective information gathering. A preliminary exercise in staff development work with teacher groups requires that we locate ourselves by region, ethnicity, and family system. The exercise requires teachers to respond to the following questions.⁶ Where were you born? What language(s) or dialect(s) were spoken in your home? Where did you grow up? Describe your neighborhood. What is your ethnic or racial heritage? Was religion important during your upbringing? If yes, how? Who makes up your family? What traditions does your family follow? What values does your family hold dear? How do the members of your family relate to each other? How is love expressed? How is your *culture* expressed in your family? These preliminary questions can help teachers begin their introspection by locating themselves in a framework familiar to them – their family background.

The processing of answers derived from the exercise allows us to become located in our personal social constructions. Teachers can thereby reflect on our conceptualization of family, using social roles and behavior within different families. Becoming aware of our definitions may help with the understanding of alternative definitions of family. Meaningful insight comes from having to think about our backgrounds and then sharing this information with others. From sharing, we gain an awareness of the similarities and differences between the various definitions. Derman-Sparks⁷ recommends that teachers form a support group of colleagues to facilitate the introspection process. In most instances, we

learn that despite diversity of meaning, family and community provide us with social safety nets that we can return to when needed for security and connection to others. This kind of exercise, explores differences and similarities between ethnic and racial groups presents insightful alternative ethnic and cultural interpretations for teachers. We begin to understand our similarities within our diversity.

Once we have thought about the preliminary questions, a deeper level of introspection can occur. After locating ourselves within a particular family and neighborhood, questions related to the individual should be considered. The questions to think about may include: What is our cultural heritage? How does our cultural background influence how we perceive and understand others? What are our values and beliefs? How do our values influence our behavior toward children? How does our socioeconomic class frame our view about children in poverty? What is our definition of normal? How do we think about differences in children, and do we implicitly relate difference to deficiency? Do we believe there are gender differences in certain types of cognitive or physical abilities? Do we think all children can learn?

These questions do not have simple answers. They touch upon many issues that we may not even be able to talk about, specifically, our values. The aforementioned questions are not related to value clarification, but will reveal our implicit cultural and social constructions. Because some aspects of culture are so ingrained, introspection is required to discover how our attitudes, behavior, and interactions are affected.

For example, through introspection, a teacher may discover she believes, like many U.S.-born Americans, that individuals are the basic building blocks of society. As a society, U.S. families rear children to be independent individuals. We hold individualism in high esteem. In contrast: many Puerto Rican parents believe that the family's welfare comes before that of any individual member; the Puerto Rican definition of individualism takes a different form. Puerto Rican children are reared to value interdependency and to hold family obligation in high esteem. These conflicting beliefs may surface in a classroom when a student (especially a female) is absent from school for an extended period to care for younger siblings. Uninformed about the cultural value of interdependency, the teacher may think the child's parents do not value education. In fact, Puerto Rican parents highly value education and encourage their children to succeed academically.⁸ The teacher's reaction to this situation may be based on how the ingrained nature of our cultural beliefs interrelate with our learned societal conceptions.

A number of outcomes may result from the introspection process: teachers may sense a lack of true cultural understanding, or they may feel disadvantaged. When asked to define themselves ethnically and culturally, some educators have a very difficult time. Many lack an ethnic consciousness. The difficulty often stems from previous schooling and socialization since the Anglo-European perspective in schools defines the average "American" as one who is White. Although

ethnicity and race are distinct social constructions and ethnicity is an essential part of culture, being ethnic in the United States is implicitly defined by some educators today as being non-White. This belies the experiences of many U.S. citizens, such as those of Italian and Irish heritage who are White ethnics.

Being “American” seems to be cast as a denial of ethnicity; ethnicity is generalized as an exotic, cultural trait. It often seems that to be “American” is to be nonethnic, when in fact it is closer to being a-ethnic, a consciousness related to the melting-pot myth that requires a loss of ethnicity in return for membership in mainstream U.S. society.

A melting-pot formulation leading to Americanization can be seen as the result of combined ethnicities canceling each other over the generations into “Americans.” The melting-pot theory is not equally accepting of all ethnic and racial groups. While the contributions of ethnic groups are supposed to compose the common core, when one examines the “common culture,” the core is primarily Anglo-European values, beliefs, and achievements. For example, as Americans we commemorate holidays such as Thanksgiving, a celebration of ancestral survival (and its underlying values of determination and hard work), but the reduction of Native Americans to second-class status which facilitated ancestral survival is not acknowledged. The subtle message is to become “American” is to be nonethnic.

On occasion, introspective teachers communicate a sense of disadvantage from our own schooling. We sense that past knowledge presented to us has offered only a partial picture of our multicultural heritage. We have received only a partial education because our schooling was monocultural in nature. We feel the loss of a significant part of our history, a loss which denies us a fuller sense of humanity and citizenship because it has distorted the importance of Anglo-European traditions by omitting diverse contributions to our society. We realize that exposure to alternative interpretations of reality may dispel the sense of superiority implicitly taught to mainstream citizenry and may better promote egalitarian social relations between people from different backgrounds. Some teachers decide this blockage to our true humanity is something we, as adults wishing to gain a multicultural awareness, have to break down.

Introspection also creates cognitive dissonance for teachers when we must reconcile differing versions of reality. This experience can be so powerful because teachers realize that the information we trusted and believed in may be only partially true and that varying cultural interpretations demand we accustom ourselves to more ambiguity. The dissonance can cause us to adjust our existing framework of knowledge and certainty. We can no longer be satisfied with easy answers because through introspection and sharing come deeper insights into the complexities of a multicultural society.

Understanding and facing the complexity of a multicultural society, where there is no one way to do things, promotes critical thinking capacity. We begin to think critically about ourselves, our beliefs, and our histories, and, consequently,

about how our beliefs are framed by societal constructions. We begin to recognize the implicit power attributions unequally assigned to cultural groups in the United States. We have to move beyond ourselves as individuals because we have been socialized within a particular society that shares a common history. The process of examining our assumptions and beliefs results in a critical awareness of past and present U.S. contexts.

Asking introspective questions can lead to an intellectual awareness of the functions of culture. Teachers need to go beyond a cognitive awareness of the influence of culture to an affective understanding. Knowing something in the abstract is insufficient to the awareness we seek; we have to be able to empathize with the experiences of others. Knowing about inequality in the abstract, believing in the principle of equality, is only a first step toward the multicultural awareness needed in classrooms. We need, for example, to put ourselves “in the shoes” of new immigrants facing institutionalized prejudices to feel their reality. The goal is to complement our intellectual introspections with affective understanding. We need to transcend thinking about differences to achieve an emotional connection. Although we can never know another’s cultural experiences in the same way as the person who undergoes those experiences, we can achieve an emotional empathy along with an intellectual awareness.

The understanding we seek goes far beyond learning about traditional holidays and ethnic foods, which are the more concrete levels of culture. Once we understand how culture shapes our perspective, our inquiry shifts to the classroom to examine how our beliefs influence our behavior. The questions to pose can be general, or directed toward a particular topic which arises in classrooms daily, such as discipline or teacher/student interactions.

A general question would be: How are our values expressed in classroom dynamics with children? More specific questions related to the areas of authority and discipline are: How do we perceive authority? Does authority come with an ascribed role? For example, does the role of teacher automatically give teachers respect, as in the U.S. American culture, or must respect be earned through the behavior of the person fulfilling that role? What do we consider appropriate behavior for children when interacting with adults? For example, when being reprimanded, do we expect children to look an adult in the eyes or to look down to show respect, as in many Latino cultures? These classroom dynamics inherently shape teachers’ expectations of children, but are rarely examined from a cultural perspective. Having clear definitions of appropriate behavior facilitates problem-solving when differing behavior is encountered because we have information on our cultural interpretations to compare and contrast to other interpretations. A critical awareness of how culture functions in the classroom demands, as a first step, teachers’ insight into our own culture.

Teachers’ sustained interactions with children affect how children feel about school. To understand how cultural background designates particular forms of verbal and nonverbal interaction teachers may ask: What kinds of verbal and

nonverbal interactions would we consider appropriate between children and the teacher? Specifically, how do we use touching behavior in the classroom? For Puerto Ricans, touching behavior exists within most interpersonal communications.⁹ Puerto Rican children expect a lot of touching and hugging behavior from adults they trust; touching behavior is interpreted as an expression of liking for children. Each of these questions invites a comparison to the cultural perspective the teacher brings to the classroom. If we begin with our own perspectives and what shapes them, we then have a basis for comparing differences and similarities between our perspectives and those of our students.

The teacher introspective process occurs in different phases; completing each phase moves teachers closer to the next phase. The first phase examines cultural and social values, both on an individual and societal basis. The second phase situates awareness on an affective level. The third phase transposes teachers' values and behavior into the classroom context. Each phase is interactive with the preceding and following phase. At each phase, teachers should work not in isolation, as we do in so many other professional processes, but in support groups or teams. Within the safety of a supportive environment, teachers can more productively examine our cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions. We can share our findings with each other and gain wisdom about the power of cultural diversity.

Efforts to infuse multicultural awareness into a professional development program for teachers have expanded in recent years, largely due to the increase of immigrant children and children of color in public schools and to a growing awareness of the significance of multicultural education reform. School should create the environment which fosters teacher development for teachers to be able to replicate multicultural awareness with their students.¹⁰

Teachers need to become introspective ethnographers in our own classrooms to decipher the cultural meanings that we and our students bring to the group. Once teachers understand our assumptions and beliefs and can appreciate and accept the unique cultural contributions of our students, we can use this knowledge to mediate effectively between the children's culture and the other cultures represented in the school.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank the National Coalition of Advocates for Students, Boston, for their support of the initial version of this paper.

Notes

1. J Banks and C. McGee Banks, *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1989). See also J. Banks, *Teaching Strategies of Ethnic Studies* 5th ed. (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1991).

2. C. Grant, "Urban Teachers: Their New Colleagues and Curriculum," *Phi Delta Kappan* (June, 1989): 764-770.
3. J. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979).
4. M. McGoldrick, J. Pearce, and J. Giodano, eds., *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1982).
5. R. Salgado, "The Puerto Rican Family," in *Puerto Ricans in the Mid 80's: An American Challenge* (Alexandria, VA: National Puerto Rican Coalition, Inc, 1985).
6. H. Sheldon and D. Burden-Patmon, *Odyssey Exercise* (Boston, MA: Community Change, Inc., n.d.).
7. L. Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force, *Anti-Bias Curriculum* (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1990).
8. N. Hidalgo, "*i saw Puerto rico once:*" *A Review of the Literature on Puerto Rican Families and School Achievement in the United States*, technical report (Boston, MA: Center on Families, Communities, Schools & Children's Learning, 1992).
9. J. Nine-Curt, *Puerto Rican Non-Verbal Communication* (Cambridge, MA: National Assessment and Dissemination Center for Bilingual Education, 1978).
10. S. Sarason, *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform* (San Fransisco, CA: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1990).