Overcoming Hidden Biases in the Classroom

Naomi Tyler

Unintentional cultural biases are often found in the classrooms, curricula, and parent conferences of teachers who are not familiar with their students’ cultures. This author uses anecdotes as well as her own first-year teaching experiences with Native American students and other anecdotes to illustrate how these biases can be overcome through building one’s cultural awareness.

The first two years after graduating from college, I worked in a small school near the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation in New Mexico. Approximately one fourth of the students were members of the Mescalero Apache tribe. I was fascinated by the students’ lives outside of school. I listened with wonder while two young boys described how they would track game in the mountains (until they encountered bear tracks, became scared, and went home). I was amazed at the 10-year-old who struggled to sound out the most basic words in reading, yet could tell me the Apache and the “white man’s” name for every plant he encountered and could describe their uses in medicines, dyes, and artwork. I was awestruck when another student revealed that he was a direct descendant of Geronimo and then proceeded to point out in a New Mexico history book all of the military personnel his legendary ancestor had dealt with. He told exciting stories of battles and secret hideouts – all were from the Apache perspective, and none were portrayed in the textbook.

It was very common for my Apache students to miss school for special ceremonies during the year. I knew that private family ceremonies for the girls marked their rite of passage to womanhood. Although I was intrigued and wanted to learn more, I was afraid to ask questions for fear of appearing rude or offending someone. In fact, I knew very little about the Apache culture, except for the bits and pieces the children revealed. My mother mailed me a few articles on working with Native American children (“to make eye contact with an elder is a sign of disrespect,” “avoid physical contact,” etc.), but that was the only literature I had available to me. Yet the behavior of my students often directly contradicted the information in the articles. My students often looked at me directly as we conversed, and I was consistently greeted with a profusion of hugs every morning before school.

Sometimes, during parent conference week, I would finally meet some of my students’ parents. Many did not show up at their appointed times for the conferences; they would show up anywhere from half an hour to several days later. I was so glad to meet them that I would make arrangements for someone to cover my class while I conversed with the parents. However, I rarely felt like I had truly “connected” with any of them. The parents would listen politely to what I told them about their child’s school performance, but when I asked them for ideas on ways to enhance the learning process, I often heard, “I don’t know. Whatever you think is good,” accompanied by a shrug. Parents would often agree to follow my recommendations regarding their children (e.g., going to bed earlier, reading for a few minutes every night, monitoring the homework carefully), but they rarely followed through on these commitments. It was obvious to me that there was a lack of communication between the home and the school, but I was unsure how to improve the situation.

Approximately one third of American schoolchildren today are of color, and estimates predict that this number will increase to 50% by the year 2025. Yet the majority of American schoolteachers (95%) are European-American (Anglo), middle-class females (Sing, 1996). What are the possible effects of the current cultural mismatch between educators and their students? The disproportionate representation of minority students in special education is one possible answer that has become a particular focus within the field of special education (Ford, 1998; MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Patton, 1998). Is it possible that cultural differences in language, communication, and behavior are the inadvertent reason that large proportions of minority students are referred to and placed in special education? The field of special education is beginning to address this question through careful empirical investigation (Kauffman, Hallahan, & Ford, 1998). However, we do know that it is critical for educators to employ culturally responsive instruction to ensure educational success for students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and...
socioeconomic backgrounds (Kea & Utley, 1998). As this issue of Reaching Today’s Youth examines ways to build cultural bridges, one can almost envision the steps on such a bridge emblazoned with words like awareness, appreciation, knowledge, and advocacy. This article focuses on cultural awareness.

Cultural Awareness
The basic awareness of diversity, or its lack thereof, is the first step (of many) toward true understanding of cultural differences. Teachers must go beyond realizing that all students are unique and that many come from significantly different backgrounds than their own. They should also anticipate that these backgrounds will substantially affect how the student perceives information and interacts within the learning environment. A teacher can easily misinterpret student behavior without an awareness of possible conflicts caused by cultural or linguistic differences. Consider the following scenario:

Two teachers are strolling down the deserted hallway of an urban middle school during the lunch hour, discussing plans for their afternoon classes. They walk over to the lone student standing in the hall, his forehead resting on a locker as he fiddles with the combination. “You have to wait outside until the bell rings,” one says to him. He looks at her briefly, then returns to fidgeting with the lock. “Students can’t be in the hallway during lunch,” she reminds him again, this time a little more insistently. Again he looks at them, the expression on his face difficult to interpret. Then he turns away once more. As the first teacher starts to move closer to him, her colleague holds up a hand to stop her and asks softly, “Habla espanol?” “Si!” comes the response, accompanied by a relieved smile. They hold a brief discussion in Spanish. He explains that he understood that he was not to be in the halls during lunch, but a group of older boys was threatening him outside and he didn’t know where else to go. Together, the three of them decide how to handle the situation. Later, the first teacher marvels at how easily she could have misinterpreted the student’s noncommunicative conduct as defiant behavior and realizes how lucky the young man was to have encountered an astute bilingual teacher.

This kind of cultural awareness is crucial for teachers like this one who are primarily from the dominant culture but are teaching increasing numbers of diverse students. Developing such an awareness can be difficult initially. For someone who has looked at the world from a certain perspective—particularly that of the dominant culture—for many years, it can be hard to see it as one from another culture might. In particular, there are several biases that educators often exhibit or perpetuate without even realizing they are doing so.

Invisibility Bias
Gollnick and Chinn (1998) list invisibility as one form of bias for teachers to be aware of in classroom materials. Invisibility is the underrepresentation or complete lack of representation of specific cultures in educational materials. A teacher may not realize that stories in a reading book, pictures in a text, and examples in a math book illustrate the dominant (European-American) middle-class lifestyle because they represent what he or she experiences every day. Erickson (1997) states that culture becomes habitual as we use it in our daily lives; because habits become invisible, culture shifts in and out of our awareness. Yet to someone from a minority culture, not having their way of life represented in school can be detrimental, although the negative effects can be hard to detect.

For example, University of New Mexico Professor Joe Suina was raised in the Cochiti Pueblo in New Mexico. He relates the pride he took in his culture and heritage as a young boy and how that changed when he began to attend school at age six (Smith & Tyler, 1995). The frowns, disapproving looks, and negative comments from a teacher who did not speak his language eroded his self-concept. The pictures of Dick and Jane playing with Spot made him critical and resentful of his own skinny dog. The adobe home of his grandmother, once regarded as made of beautiful walls which wrapped protectively around them during cold nights, suddenly seemed crooked and ugly. The absence of his culture in the school materials and curriculum implied to him that his background and lifestyle were unimportant or wrong.

Textbook publishers have become aware of the need to depict diversity within instructional materials. Many newer texts have stories,
pictures, and illustrations of individuals from many cultures. However, teachers must still be wary of older texts and materials that lack the focus of diversity.

**Sensitivity and Imbalance Biases**
Sensitivity and imbalance, two more forms of bias (Gollnick & Chinn, 1998), occur when issues and situations are interpreted from only one perspective, typically that of the dominant group. For example, math is often described as the "universal language" based on the assumption that numbers and computations work consistently in any language. However, higher-order thinking skills are needed to solve math problems. Students who come from lower-income families may have difficulty even understanding the basic premise of a word problem that contains a sensitivity or imbalance bias. Consider the following word problem:

A carpet is bought whose area is 150 square feet. Which room of the house was it bought for?
1. The spare bedroom with dimensions of 10 ft. by 15 ft.
2. The dining room with dimensions of 12 ft. by 12 ft.
3. The kitchen with dimensions of 14 ft. by 9 ft.
4. The living room with dimensions of 8 ft. by 16 ft.

Some students might simply ask, "What's a spare bedroom?" Other students might eat in the kitchen because they do not have a separate dining room. Although the math computation itself is fairly simple and the students could probably still answer correctly, the math problem assumes a knowledge of a certain type of home floor plan. However, chances are greater that students from some cultural backgrounds would not answer the next problem correctly:

It costs 60 cents for a bus token. A weekly bus pass costs $7. Is it cheaper to use tokens or a bus pass to go to and from work for a week?

Many people (and the textbook answer key) would indicate that it would be cheaper to use bus tokens. The reasoning would be that it would cost $1.20 to go to work and return home each day; the subsequent cost to go to work Monday through Friday would be $6.00. Therefore, the tokens would be cheaper than the bus pass. However, students from certain economic backgrounds would probably respond differently. Many parents work more than one job and frequently work on weekends; thus, the weekly bus pass would be a better deal. Again, the conceptual framework from which the student operates significantly influences how the student interprets instructional material. In the case above, this would have had a negative impact on the student’s grade. Teachers must analyze every aspect of the curriculum, particularly in areas where minority students perform poorly, to determine whether cultural variables might be affecting student learning.

**Consciously and Conscientiously Celebrating Diversity**
The demographics of the American public school population are changing rapidly, and all indicators predict that this change will continue for decades. The challenge for teachers who work with this wonderfully diverse population will be to acknowledge how multiple perspectives and backgrounds influence the educational setting. Students from diverse cultures often have learning styles that are in direct conflict with the teacher’s instructional style. This mismatch can have deleterious effects upon student achievement. Teachers must consciously and conscientiously gain and consider cultural knowledge to develop lesson plans and assignments that build on student strength (Gollnick & Chinn, 1998). Teachers can also be learners, celebrating the diversity within their classrooms and enthusiastically seeking information from students, their parents, and their communities in order to integrate this knowledge into their instruction.

**If I'd Known Then…**
In my case, time and experience and active knowledge-seeking have helped me to gain perspective on my early teaching experiences. Although I would need to be fully immersed in the Apache culture to truly understand its impact on school, learning, and our interactions, the following summarizes some of the information I wish I had known back then.

Many of my students’ parents avoided contact with the school because it was a very negative experience. The school did not represent and teach the values, beliefs, and ideals of their community. The things that were important to the teachers were not necessarily important to the families. Listening to someone from another culture recommend practices to be followed with their child, practices that often were in conflict with their lifestyle, was stressful to the parents.
When they quietly agreed to follow my recommendations and then did nothing, I believe they were using what Ting-Toomey (1988) calls the Self Negative-Face interactions used to protect one’s need for freedom and space and to protect against infringement on one’s autonomy. Had they not agreed with my recommendations, they may have feared I would take more extreme steps to ensure that my recommendations were followed – steps that might interfere excessively with their lifestyle. To avoid this, they quietly acknowledged my recommendations in the school setting, but then dismissed them once they were home. Additionally, because the school did not openly support the values and beliefs of the Apache people in its curriculum and teaching style, many parents viewed it as the “white man’s school.” They sent their children there because they were required to, but that was the extent of their involvement.

I am also more aware now of how time is viewed in the Apache culture. At school, we expect everything to run according to time constraints. In the Apache culture, activities are run according to task completion. An Apache parent would not leave a task unfinished in order to go to an appointment with a teacher at school. Likewise, it would be disrespectful to cut short a conversation with a tribal elder so that one could be on time for a school conference.

I understand that the school district now distributes information on the Apache culture to new teachers. The district has begun to realize the importance of recognizing the uniqueness of each culture, and its impact on the learning process. The Mescalero Elementary School, located nearby, serves only students from the reservation. The curriculum is based on Apache heritage, and concepts and skills are taught using information from daily life on the reservation. For example, within the first-grade curriculum, the Blessing Run is used to teach addition and subtraction, measurement, and calendar skills, as well as word identification and study skills. Sentence writing skills are taught using references to Apache history. The Apache culture is valued and actively taught at all levels of the school and across subject areas, as it should have been in my classroom. A member of the tribe is placed in every classroom as an educational assistant to ensure that the teachings reflect the tribal culture and heritage. Three of the teachers at the school are members of the tribe. Although this number of Apache teachers may seem small it does represent a significantly higher percentage than is typical of most reservation schools. If I were an Apache parent, I wonder which school I would choose for my child.

Naomi Tyler is a research assistant professor of special education at Vanderbilt University and the technical assistance coordinator for the Alliance Project. The Alliance Project facilitates special education personnel preparation efforts at minority colleges and universities across the country. These efforts produce high-quality teachers trained to work with students who have disabilities and are from diverse backgrounds.

References