

Preface

With many years of experience in teaching, administration, and research experience, I was drawn to write this book to dispel the notion that culture is a craft or a historical image that hangs on classroom walls. Rather it is the people, their networks, and how they live their lives, as well as the interpretations of these that we make. This book is a practical resource for elementary school teachers about real culture with real teachers and educators in real classrooms and communities. Teachers, family members, and community leaders were kind enough to allow observations, interviews, and audio and video recordings in their own settings. They opened up their lives for us to learn from their particular situations, and I fully appreciate their gifts to help us learn about the possibilities of culturally responsive instruction.

About the time that I first thought about writing this book, I was in a conversation with teachers who faced serious cutbacks resulting from state and federal budgetary deficits. One of their main concerns was that curricular programs, like multicultural education, would be eliminated because of the lack of funds. The teachers complained that school assemblies, cultural fairs, and resources for ethnic cuisine and dances were on the chopping block. Though legitimate, their disquiet sounded to me as though their schools were really celebrating the “ideal” cultures of diverse ethnic groups.

The teachers’ apprehension returned me to a time when I was an elementary school principal in an inner-city school where over 70% of the students were either African American, Latino, Vietnamese American, Filipino American, Native American, or Chinese American. Of the twenty-six teachers on the staff, twenty-two were European American, one was African American, one Japanese American, and two were Latino. The teachers became furious with me when I had us design a program to immerse ourselves in classes, lectures, and inservice training to understand the deeper meaning of cultural diversity. I cancelled the Cinco de Mayo cooking fest and the Chinese New Year dances until I was convinced

that as educators, we knew the history and lives of the people whose holidays and festivities we celebrated.

Thinking back, it was a harsh step to take, but it did force us to engage in honest dialogue. I wanted to make clear that the cultural crafts that hung in the classrooms were part of a people's "ideal" culture and that the "real" culture was lived day by day through that group's language, their family kinships, their community social networks, what they value and believe, and the meaning that they attribute to their experience. Make no mistake—music, dance, cuisine, and holidays are integral to all cultures because they unite people; they are rooted in the meaning of people's real culture. However, when only the visible, ideal culture is spotlighted, it results in stereotyping, making exotic and minimizing people's real-life, complex experience, setting them apart from European Americans who are considered "real" Americans. People's cultural identity rests on the expression of their day-to-day values, shared language, common history, attitudes, rules, and rituals and the meanings these are given.

For many of the European American teachers in the school where I was a principal, the most surprising result of the education on culture was to learn that they too had a community. They learned that everyone has one or more cultures they participate in. Up to that point, many of them believed that only recent immigrants from other countries or people of color in the United States had cultures.

Ask any person on the street if they believe that all students deserve an equitable education and an opportunity to learn; that person will probably say, "Yes." Yet there is a fundamental incongruence between our desire to educate every student who shows up in our classrooms and the traditional way that the educational system is organized. There is no equality unless we account for our diversity in race, ethnicity, culture, gender, socioeconomic status, and learning disabilities. And of course, there are regional differences that add to the mix. In a wonderfully messy way, all of these forms of diversity intersect across each other because real life isn't easy to package. We must pay serious attention to the complexity of these issues as they pertain to learning and set a path to change the inequities. To address the issue, I center my attention on how culture and learning intersect.

Indeed, culture is integral to learning. Culture is the blueprint that determines our way of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving. Culture also shapes our perceptions, interpretations, and forms of communication. Largely, culture defines our lifestyles. It's our identity, how we talk, our actions, gestures, how we handle time and space, and how we work and play.

For too long, notions of cultural differences have been interpreted as cultural deficits. From this perspective, groups different from European

Americans have been considered less intelligent and capable. Schools and the society at large have further perpetuated the deficit notion by comparing minority cultures against the majority culture. Such a comparison relegates culturally diverse groups to an inferior position. If a group is considered inferior, it tends to skew an understanding of those students' learning experience: when students from a minority group underachieve, educators attribute academic failure to the home culture (Laosa, 1983). When we assume that students' home culture is to blame for their underachievement, we set up an impossible problem to correct because as teachers, we cannot change the students' home life.

Culture plays a central role in the classroom. I draw from the fields of anthropology and education to construct a critical cultural perspective to inform how culture actually plays out in the daily life of classroom learning settings. Critical notions accept that culture is a fundamental process of human growth and learning (Gay, 2000; Lewis & Watson-Gegeo, 2005). Culture is fluid, negotiable, and dynamic (Foley, 1990). It is not a straitjacket or a set of fixed, permanent traits. From a critical viewpoint, culture determines the way in which new knowledge is integrated from varied sources to serve new purposes. This viewpoint differs from the deficit perspective in that it allows us to become proactive in the learning setting. It shifts our task from blaming to actually probing and reshaping the processes, policies, and contexts designed to address inequity. Ultimately, the premise is that no single culture is superior to another.

Thinking about our classrooms from a critical perspective, we can exercise our power in creating policies, contexts, and content to address conditions of those facing inequity in the classroom (Stein, 2005). Solutions to inequities of learning are found in the context and content of the classroom cultural setting.

When we define classroom culture in terms of context and content, it makes negotiation in the learning setting possible, benefiting all involved. *Context* refers to the set of relationships in which a life event is situated. Lewis and Watson-Gegeo (2005) ask us to picture concentric circles of influences, moving from the center outward, in which children and adults interact in any activity. *Content*, on the other hand, is the actual subject matter and formal curriculum which encompass the skills taught, along with the interactions that carry out the instruction (Gay, 2000; Hernández, 1997).

Culturally responsive curriculum content deals with concepts, principles, and ideas that explain power struggles, privilege of one group over another, and cultural identity (Gay, 2000). Winifred Montgomery (2001) discussed culturally responsive classrooms with respect to teaching children with exceptional needs. She described the classroom as a responsive place

x ● Building Culturally Responsive Classrooms

that contains these elements: “the presence of culturally diverse students and the need for these students to find relevant connections among themselves and with the subject matter and the tasks teachers ask them to perform” (p. 4). According to Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005), teachers are the central figures of the cultural learning setting. They each bring a set of values and beliefs from their own cultural backgrounds.

As part of the human family, we all live in one or more cultures. The extent of our participation in our cultures defines the plan from which we proceed. We learn to become successful people by observing and participating in our cultures and society in general in the social roles that we perform, such as mother, father, child, teacher, nurse, doctor, or business person. We are influenced by the cultures in which we engage just as much as we shape our cultural environments. Our competency in a culture depends a great deal on the degree to which we participate actively in it. Thus we are all socialized according to the patterns of the culture in which we are raised. It is easy to forget that it is a constantly changing organism. We are not merely passive recipients of a culture transmitted to us; we actively create and recreate our culture. People’s places of residence, identities, histories, and social contexts shape the relationship between knowledge and power (Apple, 1993; Freire, 1970, 1973; Giroux, 1992; Shor, 1992).

Although culturally responsive teaching calls for acknowledging the presence of linguistically and culturally diverse students in the classroom, a culturally responsive paradigm is imperative in all classrooms. European American students, just as students from culturally diverse backgrounds, ought to learn about the importance of other cultural groups.

In schools, we interact with many cultures day in and day out. First of all, as educators we behave, believe, and feel according to our respective cultural backgrounds, references, and preferences. Essentially, our cultures frame our total experience. Second, schools operate in a culturally bound way, given their organization, and, student-teacher interactions are rule bound. Students’ and teachers’ attitudes and values as well as teachers’ expectations are communicated both verbally and nonverbally. Third, the student population brings a host of different cultures and languages, depending on the community. Thus in school, both students and teachers are part of the school’s cultural experience; the elements are the teachers’ cultural background, the students’ cultural background, and the language that adults and children speak in the classroom. In a sense, teachers are cultural brokers between their students and the school culture. This is especially necessary for students who come from culturally diverse backgrounds.

In different parts of this book, I refer to cultural continuity and discontinuity, the sameness and differences within and between cultures.

Continuity is the process of cultural traditions and customs continuing in a similar way across generations and between communities or institutions, like family and school. Students for whom English is not their first language experience discontinuity if the classroom language is English only. If students speak English and are familiar with the school culture, they experience cultural continuity. Continuity is preferred, because new knowledge is more accessible and retained longer when it's connected to prior knowledge and references.

In contrast, students whose home language is Chinese, for example, will experience linguistic and cultural discontinuity until they become proficient in English. Cultural continuity and discontinuity occur in all areas of culture, including values and practices. Students are advantaged in their learning if they experience cultural continuity between their home settings and the classroom.

In a complex society, we all experience some form of discontinuity. However, students who have to perform under such conditions are disadvantaged unless there is a strong scaffolding system in place. To support students' learning, we need to acknowledge how the school and the home cultures intersect. Critical culture is in progress when there's a learning setting where students learn together across their differences.

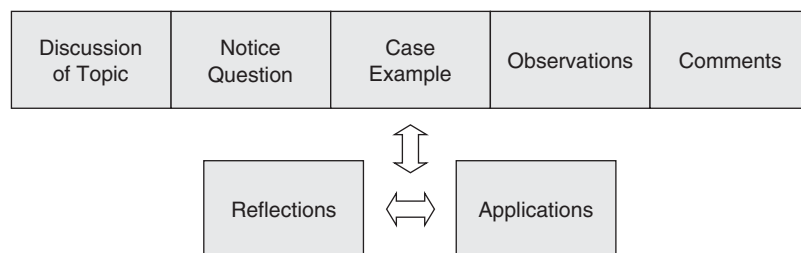
Language is a strong component in creating a culturally responsive setting, especially for students who speak languages other than English. In reference to students who speak a language other than English, I use the term *limited English proficient* (LEP) throughout the book. For the sake of consistency, it is what is used in Title 3 of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2002).

Designing a cultural environment in which all students can learn takes into account the totality of the cultural knowledge which they bring to school. Components of culture that matter most in creating effective learning settings include systems of language, of core values, and of behaviors that influence how daily lives are conducted. Language use and communication styles also play a part. Beyond the visible elements of culture are perceptions and meanings attributed to any given event.

Cultural identity labels assume different forms, including the boxes we check on government census forms or favorite pieces of literature. For the purpose of this book, I have chosen to identify cultural groups by using the names of their ethnicities and further identifying them as American. That is, people from other countries living in the United States are American, even though they have a different cultural origin. For Anglo or white students, I use the term *European American* because it identifies the group by their cultural origin. I do not use American after the term *Latino* because the label is a larger umbrella for people from numerous Latin

American and Caribbean countries. I also do not hyphenate American ethnic groups because some groups consider the hyphen a symbol marginalizing minority cultural group in the United States.

The book is divided into two parts, discussing (1) the context and (2) the content of the learning setting. Each chapter is organized according to the components diagramed in the following figure.



In the initial part of each chapter, I discuss the pertinent research. This sets the stage for the case example that follows. Before each illustration, I pose a question under the heading, "Notice." I want to focus attention on a specific question that can orient you as you examine the example. The case examples demonstrate how teachers, students, their families, and other educators create equitable learning settings, given the issue in each respective chapter. Following the Case Example, I share observations that to me seemed important, given my understanding of the illustration. They're not intended to be the last word on the subject, and they may not be what you will find to be the most significant. Hopefully, you will formulate observations specific to your perceptions and interests. The comment sections consist of general statements about the chapter's topic. In the reflections, readers can pause and examine their own situations. The applications sections offer ideas and opportunities to put an aspect of the topic into action.

In Part I, the Context section, I begin with the concepts of cooperation and competition because through them we get to see how the cultural ways in which children learn in their homes and community transfer to their classroom behavior. After a glimpse outside of school, I bring the focus back into the classroom in dealing with issues of policies affecting the inclusion of exceptional students and those with special needs. These two groups are subject to cultural beliefs as well as educational policies. And their access to learning settings that best meet their needs is crucial as we consider culturally responsive classrooms. Then, I move into the way the classroom furniture is arranged, not to make light of the situation but rather to visit the concept of cultural discontinuity and how something seemingly minor reflects important cultural values that influence learning.

I then travel to the students' cultural identities and the school's attempt to understand how important it is for students to maintain their connection with their home cultures. The logical next step is to look at the topic of parent education and how critical the teacher-parent partnership is to students' learning.

Part 2, the content section, follows a progression of subject matter taught in classrooms. I present the topics in the order that makes sense when thinking about teaching in culturally responsive classrooms. Each subject builds on the one before it the first chapter is about appreciating cultural differences. The chapter on building literacy expands the chapter on English language development. Then equity issues are addressed. Through these subjects, teachers increase the learning opportunities for all students. The last chapter sums up the lessons learned from teachers, students, and parents and their complex situations, which they have shared so kindly.

Chapter I—Introduction: The context section contains chapters on the cultural configuration needed to achieve academic performance. This includes how teachers organize the classroom to include students, parents, and other resources, such as policies, to make it culturally responsive. Although the classroom's physical and material props are part of learning setting, the cultural organization of the classroom contains more than desks and chairs. It also involves the verbal and nonverbal interaction that shapes knowledge. *Content* in the classroom—formal and informal curriculum—comprises the subject areas through which students and teachers interact. This substance is embedded in the cultural organization, including subject matter, lessons, and materials used in the classroom.

PART I. CONTEXT: CONFIGURING THE CLASSROOM FOR ACADEMIC EQUITY

Chapter 2—Engaging With Children's Values Around Cooperation and Competition—is the springboard for understanding how children perform in and out of their homes, play in their community and the school, and organize their lives according their familiar cultural rules. Yolanda's teacher shows how classroom lessons either engage or discount children's skills which they bring to school.

Chapter 3—Culturally Responsive Classroom Discipline—discusses how decisions get made in a culturally bound way. Teachers and school administrators have to pay attention to the school's cultural composition and the manner in which suspensions, expulsions, and afterschool detentions are issued. First-person accounts by teachers recognize that close dialogue with

the students' home cultures can collaboratively resolve discipline and other behavior problems. Classroom teacher, Ms. Cohen, recognized that addressing a culturally diverse student's behavior problems meant confronting her own perceptions of cultural differences.

Chapter 4—Accelerating Exceptional Students—focuses on advancing students from all linguistic and cultural groups as part of creating a culturally inclusive learning setting. Students from diverse linguistic backgrounds exhibit their talents in significant ways. Identifying students with exceptional abilities necessitates teachers becoming involved with special programs to integrate students with diverse needs. Mrs. Zims found herself dealing not only with Hai, her student, but also with the administration, Hai's parents, and the community to address appropriate placement for Hai, who had exceptional academic skills and was bored in the classroom.

Chapter 5—Including Students With Special Needs—talks about the main goal of special education: to integrate students with disabilities into inclusive settings. Labeling students as “disabled” poses lifelong problems for students with disabilities unless they can learn in nonjudgmental environments, where teachers and peers recognize their diverse abilities. Mrs. Hansen works with a student with special needs in interactive learning environments, allowing him to use more expressive language and manage his time more independently.

Chapter 6—Culturally Responsive Classroom Management—shows how a hierarchy of power is established by the way that the furniture is organized. How and where the students sit either facilitates or discourages teacher-student interaction which in turn determines the extent to which students can maximize their potential. Teacher Mrs. Jones demonstrates the positive aspects of cultural discontinuity that builds a supportive learning environment for her students. She provides a strong learning setting, different from what students experience at home and their community, by emphasizing quiet and orderliness, allowing them to concentrate and work in an orderly fashion. Her respect and high expectation for her students validates their potential.

Chapter 7—Supporting Children's Cultural Adjustment—describes how Russian refugee students and their families orchestrate their social and cultural context as they make meaning of their daily practices. The schools provide ways in which students can grow and change. Russian students are forced to shape a new cultural identity, and that requires much more than the school curriculum. It takes the assistance and support of their families, church leadership, and other community institutions.

Chapter 8—Connecting Home and School—deals with an aspect central to the classroom's cultural process. Parent-teacher communication

is founded on a set of cultural beliefs and practices that can either unify or separate these two groups. Bridging the two settings requires a common language of respect, trust, and willingness that allows parents and teachers to work toward one goal—students' academic success. Teachers Ms. Kent and Mrs. Calvo work with classroom parents to bridge families and schools by training parents in math and literacy and having some parents to co-lead parent training workshops.

PART II. CONTENT: LEARNING SUBJECT MATTER THROUGH CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

Chapter 9—Teaching Cultural Diversity—discusses building bridges between cultures through effective teaching, expanding students' social worlds, and motivating and celebrating the underpinnings of human justice, equity, and others' cultural values and customs. The way cultural differences are taught in the classroom can unify or create distance between students and the communities they live in. Ms. Carey broadens students' thinking about family differences and different families through quilt making and other family cultural recreation activities.

Chapter 10—Becoming Proficient in English—deals with a crucial issue. Without a doubt, instruction in English is the most pivotal part of cultural classroom curriculum. Stories abound about the way that schools hold low expectations of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. But where strong systematic efforts are made to prepare teachers to teach English language development, their students' academic performances flourish. Ms. Rivers works with Chua and other LEP students as they attempt to learn English in a school without a formal English Language Development (ELD) program.

Chapter 11—Building Literacy—focuses on a culturally defined process involving the instruction and use of oral and written text blended into a system of communication. This combines the knowledge that teachers bring to the classroom with the ways that parents pose questions to their children and the bedtime stories that live in their memories. In his classroom, Mr. Sanchez challenges the students from culturally diverse backgrounds to wrestle with fiction and fantasy by tapping into their own worlds outside of school.

Chapter 12—Creating Equity in Math and Science—discusses how implementing peer interaction and involvement increases learning. The more students participate in their own learning, the more they learn. The promise of interactive instruction is that teachers and students learn new roles and new ways of learning, group work, for example. Interactive

instruction fosters open-endedness, multiple intellectual abilities, and a common group product. It is critical to build equitable learning environments for those students previously marginalized in math and science. Mr. Beck and Ms. Williams use interdisciplinary methods to teach students the interrelationships that exist among math, language, and culture. Students learn the tools to discover explanations of their own, and they learned self-reliance through the critical inquiry method.

Chapter 13—Fostering Gender Equity—posits that gender identity is learned and advocates making the issue of gender prominent in the curriculum, the classroom routines, and school practices in general. It describes how classroom teachers are now better prepared with awareness, knowledge, and materials to teach new values to their students about the true potential of girls and women in society. Mrs. Yeh feels strongly about the importance of the subject of gender equity. Her interdisciplinary curriculum exposes both boys and girls to a rich variety of women’s cultural contributions to society and the day-to-day work involved for women to break out of conventional roles and move into professional arenas.

Chapter 14—Crafting an Interdisciplinary Curriculum—builds on the reality and complexity of people’s lives in this society. In elementary schools, teachers successfully combine disciplines through thematic projects and subject matter, such as literature, environmental studies, history, and music. And by doing so, they expand cultural perspectives in learning. Ms. Guy and Mrs. Jason foster respect for the Cheyenne culture. They present the multidimensional life of the Cheyenne people while motivating students to question their attitudes about lifestyles of people different than themselves.

Chapter 15—Responding Culturally in Teaching—spotlights the idea that linking culture to learning involves a rich web of knowledge of all parties involved—teachers, students, peers, parents, the wider educational system, and the broader community. Children bring to school a treasury of information about their cultures, families, and communities. By creating learning settings that integrate students’ multiple abilities, intelligences, and cultural and linguistic resources, teachers set high expectations and provide equitable learning opportunities in English, literacy, math, science, and multicultural education.

The chapters in this book illustrate how culture manifests in the daily life of the classroom and how teachers play a central role in shaping school culture. They share various conscious and effective ways to harness students’ cultures to enhance learning.

Building Culturally Responsive Classrooms supports teachers in their efforts to build awareness of cultural complexities and how they intersect with socioeconomic conditions, geographic settings, and gender roles. The

case examples in each chapter assist teachers in designing culturally responsive classrooms by using culturally responsive, interactive teaching with students and their families and establishing school policies that respect culturally diverse groups.

My professional biography has been rich with opportunities to work with culturally diverse students, families, and communities. Although much of my professional work has been conducted in Latino communities in the southwestern United States, I have also worked with Russian refugee, Hmong, African American, Vietnamese, and Alaskan Native communities. Urban, suburban, rural, small, and large communities provide the background for this book. In my various professional roles, I have had the privilege of observing, studying, appreciating, and participating in changing learning communities for the better. Since the very first day I walked into my first classroom as a teacher, I have been interested in how the students utilized their home languages and cultures in learning. I have also had the opportunity to see how influential family life is in children's learning. The families I have met value their children's education. I have observed that in classrooms where friendly handshakes replace fences, teachers, students, and families thrive. Some of those handshakes compose the stories assembled in this book.