

ON POINT



# Cultural Identity and Teaching

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### ***THE MISSION OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT***

is to partner with Regional Resource Centers to develop powerful networks of urban local education agencies and schools that embrace and implement a data-based, continuous improvement approach for inclusive practices. Embedded within this approach is a commitment to evidence-based practice in early intervention, universal design, literacy and positive behavior supports.

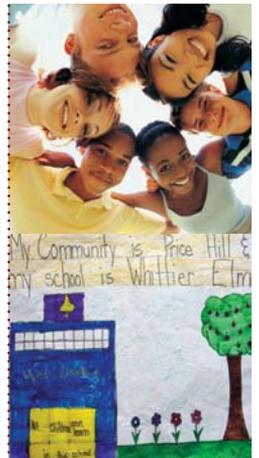
The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), of the U.S. Department of Education, has funded NIUSI to facilitate the unification of current general and special education reform efforts as these are implemented in the nation's urban school districts. NIUSI's creation reflects OSEP's long-standing commitment to improving educational outcomes for all children, specifically those with disabilities, in communities challenged and enriched by the urban experience.

ON POINT SERIES

# Cultural Identity and Teaching

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*This On Point is the second in a series of three On Points that explore issues around culture and teaching. The first On Point operationalizes the way in which NIUSI defines culture and how to think about educational settings and scenarios from the point of view of culture. While this On Point focuses on teacher's identity, the third On Point in this series addresses how classrooms are enriched by the funds of knowledge and assets that children and their families bring with them from their homes and communities.*

*One thing becomes clear enough. Teaching as the direct delivery of some preplanned curriculum, teaching as the orderly and scripted conveyance of information, teaching as clerking, is simply a myth. Teaching is much larger and much more alive than that; it contains more pain and conflict, more joy and intelligence, more uncertainty and ambiguity. It requires more judgment and energy and intensity than, on some days, seems humanly possible. Teaching is spectacularly unlimited (Ayres, 2001, p. 5).*

## CULTURE MATTERS

Teachers bring themselves—their life experiences, histories, and cultures—into the classroom. They bring their assumptions and beliefs about what a good teacher is and does, their knowledge of education theory, research, and human development, and their love and knowledge of content areas. They bring their personalities and teaching styles that are shaped by social and cultural interactions. Some teachers are extroverted and come alive

when they are with others. Other teachers are energetic and lively around their students, but need down time to refuel and ground themselves. Some teachers love routine and predictability, while other teachers become particularly excited when routines are interrupted and they can act spontaneously. All of this is shaped and reshaped by daily experiences in the classroom. The longer teachers teach, the more their beliefs and knowledge are reorganized and sculpted by experience.

Experience, culture, and personality are just part of who teachers are, and they go wherever teachers go—including their classrooms. For teachers from dominant cultural backgrounds (white, middle class teachers in the United States), their own culture may not be something they are immediately aware of because it fits so seamlessly with prevailing opinions, beliefs, values, and expectations about behavior, education, and life choices. Yet, many choices that teachers make are determined more from their cultural background than from individual beliefs. The expectations that teachers hold for teaching and learning are grounded in cultural beliefs that may be unfamiliar to students and families from non-dominant cultures.

Teachers continually express their culture; the danger is being unaware of that expression. Coming to an understanding of the ways in which one's beliefs, experiences, values, and assumptions are linked to culture is an essential feature of culturally responsive practice. As Giroux (1992) says, "Teachers need to find ways of creating a space for mutual engagement of lived difference that does not require the



silencing of a multiplicity of voices by a single dominant discourse” (p. 201). Cultural responsiveness requires teachers to acknowledge and understand their own cultural values and how this impacts their own teaching practice.

Cultural disconnect can occur when individuals from different cultures interact. Schools in which the cultural backgrounds of teachers differ significantly from their students because of ethnic, racial, linguistic, social, religious, or economic reasons are especially vulnerable to cultural disconnect. For example, consider a situation in which both a teacher and the family of one of her students value education and family. The teacher’s beliefs include a principle that children should always attend school because of the learning and continuity that takes place in the classroom. The family, however, takes the student out of school for two weeks in order to visit a grandmother who lives out of the country. The family feels the trip is important for the student to learn and connect with the family’s elders. For them, this trip is part of their child’s education and does not hinder their child’s education. Conflict arises between the teacher and the student’s family even though both value education and family.

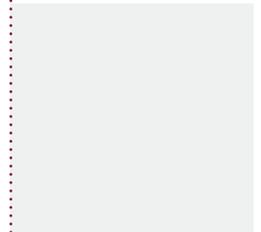
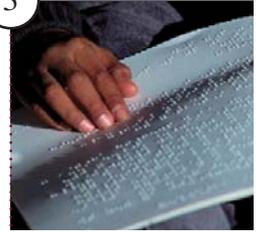
So, who is to say one is wrong and the other is right? The dominant cultural perspective will prevail unless teachers are able to create space to discuss and explore a variety of values, beliefs, and expectations with the family. Teachers, students, and families may disagree on the nature and value of schoolwork; work ethics may differ in definition; and the role of home, family, and community may diverge in respect to school.

Teachers who understand and value their own cultural identities recognize culture as a complex construction. In doing so, they create the possibility for deeper connections with their students and families. Cultural responsiveness comes from understanding self and others so that different values are understood and respected, rather than one set of values being imposed on all. Culturally responsive teachers can build robust learning environments in which students and teachers can build richer and deeper understandings of themselves and each other as they investigate and uncover the school curriculum.

## VARIATION IN CULTURAL IDENTITY

Recognizing that *everyone* has unique traditions, values, and beliefs that are important to them (ethnic identity, language, religion and formal/informal community, neighborhood, and family connections) helps us to see how we are connected. Researchers like Eleuterio (1997) and Hoelscher (1999) observed that classrooms filled with teachers and students who openly share their lives, their cultural identities, and their life experiences build trust and foster stronger relationships. This climate leads to student engagement and excitement about learning together. Getting to this place requires an understanding of the factors that influence individual cultural identity. Consider the following three teachers.

Jane, Michael, and Frieda, are in their late twenties and work together in an urban middle



school. It would be easy to assume that Jane and Michael share similar cultures, values, and beliefs because both are white, while Frieda identifies herself as Latina; but teachers have particular experiences and cultural traditions—in addition to their national identity. They may live in the same country, but their individual cultural identities connect them to various parts of the world, languages, and family histories. Even cultures that seem related on the surface may vary significantly. Think about Jane’s experience.

Jane identifies herself as Irish American and grew up in a large Roman Catholic family. The ancestors of both of her parents came to the United States during the Irish potato famine in the 1840s. As is common with many teachers, Jane is the first family member to have attended college. Her father was a factory worker, subject to the unstable employment conditions of the market, and her mother stayed home to take care of her seven children. When Jane did well enough in school to think about college, her family was divided. On the one hand, some members of her family felt that Jane had an obligation to earn money when she graduated from high school to support the family. Going to college seemed like a way to avoid that responsibility. On the other hand, her father knew that Jane could have greater opportunities if she went on to college. Her father prevailed, and Jane attended the local public college on a scholarship. There she learned to set her own goals, rather than always defer to her family’s needs. She learned to plan for the future and create high expectations for herself. She was amazed at how her education began to unlock doors in the community. Jane

became convinced that teaching was a way to unlock doors for other children like her. She prepared to be a teacher with a strong set of personal beliefs about the value of education, hard work, and persistence. As an adult, Jane actively participates in the Irish community; she organizes activities for her local church and spends her free time studying genealogy and teaching Irish step dancing.

Michael’s cultural background is less clearly defined. Michael’s ancestors are a combination of French, German, Dutch, and English. Michael’s parents were both professionals. His mother was a respected architect in urban design and his father was a partner in a major law firm with a passion for civil rights. Michael went to Mexico in fifth grade and developed a strong interest in service learning to give back to the community. He graduated magna cum laude from a private liberal arts college in the Midwest and is currently attending a master’s program in social work. Since high school, Michael has been a fluent Spanish speaker and leads tours to Costa Rica in the summers. He is adept at helping his tour group to understand the local ecology, connect with local artisans, and explore the culture. Growing up, he attended a Methodist church with his family, but currently, he is exploring Eastern religions. He volunteers at a local environmental group and spends his weekends working in a community garden project.

Frieda is the first generation in her family to grow up in the United States. Her parents emigrated from El Salvador to escape political



persecution. Her family had extended roots in El Salvador and remains connected to family members that were left behind. Frieda prides herself on an extensive art background that is particularly connected to pre-Columbian sculpture. She took ballet and voice classes as a child. Her father is a history professor at a local college, and her mother is an elementary school teacher. After long conversations with her mother and father, Frieda recently discovered that her grandparents were among the first activists to promote pride in the indigenous cultures of their homeland. This creates some interesting conflicts for Frieda who attended Catholic schools throughout her schooling, including a four-year undergraduate Jesuit college. On the one hand, her religious background comes from the church that helped to colonize her people. On the other hand, she celebrates the traditions of liberation theology and social justice within the Catholic Church. She chose teaching for the time being while she continues to explore other careers. Frieda aspires to a career in the theater as a set designer but knows this is a difficult commitment. In the meantime, she leads school productions and serves as a docent at the local botanical garden.

As we think about these three teachers, we begin to notice shared spaces where their experiences and beliefs overlap and other spaces in which they hold different perspectives. The meanings that each teacher has made from their individual life experiences may vary widely, while on the surface they may appear similar. Frieda and Jane share a religious background, Michael

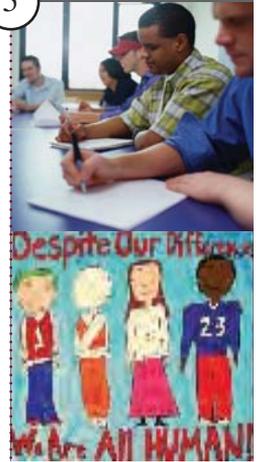
and Frieda share a socio-economic background, and Michael and Jane share a racial background. They are all teachers, but their reasons for choosing that career path vary. Additionally, they have a variety of common interests—Michael and Frieda like to garden and Frieda and Jane share an interest in the arts. Getting to know them independently helps us to understand how individuals both differ and share commonalities.

We all participate in a variety of cultural settings. Membership in communities, groups, and families can be a source of strength and promotes a sense of belonging; they can also be a source of exclusion if we are not aware of the impact that our various cultures and beliefs have on our actions. Sharing our lives with others builds self-esteem, self-confidence, and pride.

## HOW CAN TEACHERS BUILD AWARENESS OF THEIR OWN CULTURE, ESPECIALLY VALUES AND BELIEFS?

Understanding your own cultural background and connecting that background to the students in your classroom creates a rich learning environment in which the teacher and students value each other. The following activities can deepen your understanding of the ways in which your culture influences your practice as a teacher.

- Learn about your own history, heritage, community, family, and culture, as well





- as other groups to which you belong.
- Talk to friends and family; share stories, and listen to the stories of others' life experiences and family histories.
  - Write about your celebrations, traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices.
  - Reflect on the things you value in your life including significant artifacts, customs, family events, and the ways in which you celebrate them.
  - List some characteristics of your culture. Consider your communication style and other cultural norms.
  - Embark on a reading program. In the next few months, be purposeful about the topics and authors that you select for reading. Try to choose authors who represent cultures that vary from your own. Read both fiction and nonfiction accounts of *border crossing*, a term used to describe moving across racial and cultural groups. Join or start a reading club that engages readers from multiple backgrounds.
  - List the things that you do in your classroom that come from your cultural perspective. Check your list with a teaching colleague. How are your lists different and similar?

## HOW CAN TEACHERS BUILD AND PRESENT CULTURE IN THEIR CLASSROOMS?

Use reflection and inquiry as you explore and examine how your own cultural identity emerges and influences your professional practice. From the list below, choose some topics

that you'd like to explore with your current students. Discipline yourself to journal your observations; categorize some of the incidents that happen as you move through your inquiry. Be sure to find someone with whom to share your experience. Remember that learning is shaped through interaction with others.

- Write about and reflect on the current culture in your classroom. Use the questions as guidelines for reflecting on your own teaching practice:
  - **BELONGING** How are students greeted in my classroom? Who is silent and who participates? What kinds of adult / student interaction patterns occur? What about student to student? To do this over time, you might want to make a class list and begin to make checks by students' names as they enter your room. Review this information at the end of the week, and record your observations in a journal. Collect three or four of these weekly observations and share them with a colleague. Invite a colleague to observe your classroom, and share notes. Are you observing psychological or cultural differences?
  - **CONDUCT** What are the rules of conduct in the classroom? Who knows what they are? How is following them recognized? How are errors corrected? What kinds of conduct are allowed, and what kinds are not acceptable? What happens to students who follow the rules and to those who do not? How does this



affect their status in the classroom, school, and their neighborhood? To answer these questions, take some data in your own classroom. You could ask students to answer these questions in small groups, and record their responses. Alternatively, you could observe your classroom carefully as you go about teaching. Notice the number of times that you reward and reprimand students. Write these numbers down. Also, you may begin to note the gender and race of students. Is there a difference based on these characteristics? Watch for patterns that emerge from your notes. Invite your colleague to observe your classroom, and then discuss her observations.

- **LEARNING** Pay attention to these issues. Who is earning the highest grades in your class? Who is engaged in learning? With whom do you spend time, and who gets little of your attention? How much time do you spend giving feedback and to which students? Which students are suggesting topics for learning and doing? Which students wait for you to lead them? Notice patterns among boys and girls, among cultural and linguistic groups, and among students with varying abilities.

## BE CONSCIOUS ABOUT BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE

Share your stories about your life with students. Have time throughout the school year for

everyone, including you, to tell or portray life stories. Work to build a strong culture outside of your classroom. Share plans and ideas with your peers, and seek out collaboration opportunities; they are often where you least expect them! Learn about the lives of the teachers, administrators, and staff in your building. Be aware that an inclusive culture is not just about sharing cultural experiences, but about using the diverse backgrounds, values, and experiences that individual students and teachers bring to the classroom to expand our understanding of how our world works. Understanding our own and others' culture is about creating spaces to not only recognize and value diverse culture, but to support the inclusion of new values and beliefs into our everyday lives and activities.

### ACTIVITIES:

- Create professional development opportunities that allow teachers time to reflect on their cultural heritage with peers (memoir writing, artifact sharing, and shared cultural celebrations).
- Share your experiences, celebrations, and important events with your students. Integrate storytelling (writing, speaking, drawing, and creating) into your curriculum.
- Bring in your cultural "artifacts" that may or may not be familiar to students, and have students hypothesize and discuss their purpose, meaning, and value.
- Create space that everyone in your classroom can access. Together, make a class quilt, student bulletin board, or family photo album.
- Integrate celebrations into your classroom



in which *everyone* in the class can share—  
have the class make up their own!

- Use conversations about your own cultural background and experiences to prompt students to share their own backgrounds and heritage.

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❖  
Produce high achieving students.

❖  
Construct education for  
social justice, access and equity.

❖  
Expand students' life opportunities,  
available choices and community contributions.

❖  
Build on the extraordinary resources that  
urban communities provide for life-long learning.

❖  
Use the valuable knowledge and experience that  
children and their families bring to school learning.

❖  
Need individuals, family organizations and communities to  
work together to create future generations of possibility.

❖  
Practice scholarship by creating partnerships  
for action-based research and inquiry.

❖  
Shape their practice based on evidence of what  
results in successful learning of each student.

❖  
Foster relationships based on care,  
respect and responsibility.

❖  
Understand that people learn in different  
ways throughout their lives.

❖  
Respond with learning  
opportunities that work.



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