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## Growing...But Constrained: An Exploration of Teachers' and Researchers' Interactions with Culture and Diversity through Personal Narratives

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## **Growing...But Constrained: An Exploration of Teachers' and Researchers' Interactions with Culture and Diversity through Personal Narratives**

### **Abstract**

Educators from all realms of education who engage in in-depth conversations and reflections about personal experiences and perspectives related to diversity are significantly important to the cultural understandings in Education. This paper is a narrative analysis of how teachers who were enrolled in a Master's Program from two university campuses of the same predominantly White university participated in an in-depth look at their diverse cultural experiences through reflection and dialogue. Two researchers, one African American female utilizing the Critical Race Theory perspective the other Caucasian female using Socio-constructivism, interacted with one another and the teachers' narratives through several personal experiences interchanges. The resulting teacher/research dialogue on culture and diversity revealed how when the constraints of different theoretical frameworks and past encounters with culture and diversity are exposed a space for dialogue on culture and diversity, characterized by growth, opens up.

### **Keywords**

Diversity, Teachers, Culture, Narrative Analysis, Critical

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## **Growing...But Constrained: An Exploration of Teachers' and Researchers' Interactions with Culture and Diversity through Personal Narratives**

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*Educators from all realms of education who engage in in-depth conversations and reflections about personal experiences and perspectives related to diversity are significantly important to the cultural understandings in Education. This paper is a narrative analysis of how teachers who were enrolled in a Master's Program from two university campuses of the same predominantly White university participated in an in-depth look at their diverse cultural experiences through reflection and dialogue. Two researchers, one African American female utilizing the Critical Race Theory perspective the other Caucasian female using Socio-constructivism, interacted with one another and the teachers' narratives through several personal experiences interchanges. The resulting teacher/research dialogue on culture and diversity revealed how when the constraints of different theoretical frameworks and past encounters with culture and diversity are exposed a space for dialogue on culture and diversity, characterized by growth, opens up. Key Words: Diversity, Teachers, Culture, Narrative Analysis, Critical Race Theory, and Socio-Constructivism*

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The graduate education classroom is intended to be a space in which learning takes place through interaction with content and thought. The standards with regard to diversity are threaded throughout the content and interactions that the students have within each course they take. Dialogue on diversity is typically facilitated by exercises which are designed to give the teachers-as-students a space to interact with their own beliefs, values, and perceptions for the purpose of enhancing their cultural awareness.

As U.S. schools service increasingly diverse student populations, the need for such a dialogic space in education is amplified. Some researchers believe that teachers engaged in such activities have found inconclusive or minimal changes of depth or breadth of teachers' cultural understanding after such course engagement (Jennings, 2007). On the contrary, Critical Race Theory (CRT) researchers have found that educators grow in their cultural understandings and practices once they become comfortable with their own identities following the above stated activities (Helms, 1992; Tatum, 2009). This study seeks to enhance this work by addressing the following: How do teachers and researchers who interact with personal and past experiences inform present perceptions of culture and diversity?

Within this context, two female professors in education who are also researchers, one African American and one Caucasian, sat down to analyze autobiographic narratives of 64 teachers who had responded to issues of culture during a graduate Foundations of Education course. The teachers who are enrolled in a master's program, from two

university campuses of the same predominantly White university participated in a Culture Learning Process (CLP). The CLP is a tool that is used as a voluntary exercise within the African American researcher's courses for teachers to give students the opportunity to take an in-depth look at their diverse cultural experiences by reflecting on 12 cultural attributes (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2003). This instrument is intended for the participants to reflect upon their construction of culture and diversity through personal narratives.

As the teachers' narratives were read and analyzed, an unexpected dialogue surfaced which provoked rich thought and interaction in the midst of controversy. Even though we, as researchers are both females with advanced degrees in education, experienced teaching outside the contiguous United States, and have religious backgrounds, and although we would describe ourselves as being more culturally aware than the typical teacher, the ensuing dialogue during the data analysis exposed dissonance and heightened emotion due to each of our points-of-view. Within a few months it became apparent that this dialogue needed attention because we were approaching the analysis of the data from two distinct personally adopted theoretical frameworks that appeared to clash. The Caucasian researcher, Martha, chose to employ a Vygotskian (1978) socio-constructivist view of meaning construction to her analysis (Kozulin, 2003; Wertsch, 1991), while the African American researcher, Kimetta, framed her analysis within the lens of Critical Race Theory (Bell, 2009; Delgado, 1995).

The following includes each of our interactions with the teachers' data in dialogue with our own autobiographic narrative and theoretical framework. The juxtaposition of these narratives and ensuing dialogue revealed the importance and reframing of dialogic space in teacher education. This interaction between the analysis of the data, discussions between the researchers, and the narrative voices that emerged during the CLP from the teachers, exposed multiple voices and contexts. The discussions and analysis revealed the value of a space in which the exposure of diverse theoretical analyses and past encounters with culture and diversity can provide the opportunity for a dialogue that is characterized by growth within constraints.

### **The Caucasian Researcher Constructing Meaning**

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist approach to learning places interactions between experts and novices at the center of how one learns. These interactions provide learners a way to make meaning of what is experienced first externally or interpersonally and then internally or intrapersonally.

According to this Vygotskian framework, the construction of meaning is influenced by a person's socio-historical context – that which has been experienced throughout his or her life in context (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). These past experiences can be personally and/or socially shared, creating a set of psychological assumptions carrying values and beliefs into each interaction (Bruner, 1996; Quinn & Holland, 1987). Bruner noted that this personally held set of assumptions can be seen as “folk psychologies” and that these are constructed by one's perceptions, which may contain partial truths as well as myths constructed within interactions. Cultural psychologists identify these socially shared assumptions as “cultural models” (Quinn & Holland). As these are seen within a socio-constructivist framework as dynamic,

constantly being constructed, they have been recently been reconceived not as cultural models but as “storylines” (Gee, 2005). Gee suggests that these storylines carry two key characteristics particularly pertinent to this present study. First, they are not static decontextualized events but dynamic, continually being co-constructed as people interact with those in the moment, and second, these constructions are being shaped by one’s past and present experiences embedded in one’s context. This socio-constructivist understanding of storylines guided this researcher’s approach to the data.

### **The African American Researcher Constructing Meaning**

The Critical Race Theoretical framework on educational equity emphasizes that race is a relevant component to be explored when an individual critically reflects subconsciously or consciously on personal experiences that define their identity (Delgado, 1995; Helms, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2009). The CRT movement is growing fast in academia, and it is also the most controversial; hence when educators address race along with other cultural attributes, their identity and educational practices in the classroom surface, and the lens on race widens the opportunity for educators to take into account other cultural perspectives (Parker & Lynn, 2009).

According to Delgado (1995), CRT begins with the notion that race is a normal part of society and in many facets of life it cannot and should not be avoided. Ladson-Billings (2009) discusses that the Critical Race Theoretical approaches to education including equal and equitable education for all students, the consideration of the harmful effects of colorblind and race-neutral curriculum, and exposure of racism in the educational system. Understanding the general aspects of the cultural group involved in a study, the researcher must analyze how personal characteristics affect the fieldwork and the relationships with the individual participants they encounter (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). According to Tatum (2009), “White students, in particular, often struggle with the strong feeling of guilt when they become aware of the pervasiveness of racism in our society” (p. 278). Tatum discusses that understanding the development of one’s racial identity can lead to conversations and opportunities to talk to others with similar experiences with Three Models of Whiteness. They include: the “actively racist white supremacist,” the “what whiteness,” and the “guilty white” (Tatum, pp. 284-285). Using these models in the analysis of the data and using race as an analytical tool, the construction of identity reveals constraints and conflicts within the past and present experiences of individuals. Within this exposure, biological, emotional, and personal realizations are revealed.

### **Multiple Voices**

Whereas in studies like this one the students, teachers, and teacher educators have been invited into this conversation, there are voices which have been largely unheard. The researcher’s voice has, for the most part, remained in the background, implicitly contributing to the conversation while going relatively unnoticed. In recognition of Bakhtin’s (1986) concept of multivoicedness which describes how each interlocutor brings multiple voices into any conversation, the dynamic voices appealed to by the researcher, students, and teacher educators constructed from their past interactions and

present understandings have also not been heard. Thus, this study set out to provide a space to hear the teachers and researchers voices regarding culture and diversity. We begin here with our voices situated within personal narratives, which set the context of our data analysis and ensuing dialogue.

### **The Caucasian Researcher's Voice**

When I stepped off the plane for the first time onto soil outside the United States, I was accosted by sights and smells which I had never encountered before that moment. For those first weeks and months in France, immersed in an intensive language program, I was in a continual dialogue with my past and in conflict with the script I had written before I had arrived, as it was being rewritten each moment of this experience. I had grown up with three powerful voices: my father's, my grandfather's, my mother's. My father was a pastor who taught me to value spirituality at a young age. My German grandfather came with his parents to the U.S. to make their lives in New York City. Permeating most of my interactions with him was the message that this land was "for the White person" and the rest should "stay away." In contrast, my mother, his daughter, lived a life marked by listening to and helping people from all cultural backgrounds. She instilled in her children the passion to learn from others through stories.

As our family's home context shifted from a rural area to the Southside of Chicago, our response to people, from cultural and ethnic backgrounds different from our own, also shifted. Within a short time after our move, two incidents played a role in constructing new borders as a family and they stand out clearly in my mind to this day. One was an African American man who went on a shooting spree in our neighborhood. Instead of the leisurely walk home the few blocks from school, all of us attending the neighborhood elementary school were met by our parents that day in cars and whisked home. We sat with curtains drawn until we received an all-clear phone call from the local police. Not long after that a homemade bomb was successfully detonated in the gym of the neighborhood junior high school with messages declaring anger against Whites. Jesse Jackson's meetings were more and more prominent in the local news, and for the first time in our family's life we found ourselves puzzled by the hatred and bitterness displayed by African Americans in our local area. This was foreign to us as we sought to live a life accepting and caring of all. It also was perceived as a serious threat to our sense of safety, which became a value to be held onto and protected.

Years later my first teaching job took me to Miami, Florida, at a time when refugees were washing on shore by the hundreds. Many were placed in refugee camps while the children were placed in overcrowded, unprepared schools. As teachers, we frequently experienced "riot days," which was when schools closed because shootings were taking place on a broad scale across the city, instigated by the refugees out of frustration. My emotional response to this was not one of fear but a strong drive to close the camps and incorporate all into society. I was intrigued by the multiple cultural thoughts and values being brought into the schools and city by those from Haiti and saw this as a valuable asset being squandered by society.

In response I moved to a teaching appointment in a school overseas. There was nothing safe or familiar about this new setting. I moved into a rural area of West Africa to teach in a boarding school operated for missionaries' children and other expatriates'

children. I had been transported into a society that viewed the world as a spiritual space in which one lived and died by the dictate of the spiritual world. For survival, the people lived in villages, creating a place where people from one ethnic group could live and develop as a self-sustaining and safe society. The meticulously followed safety rules and regulations from their elders were created to guard them against attack from other people groups – those of a different shade of black from their own and who spoke a different dialect. Their spiritual worldview where I lived saw nature as ruler and giver and taker of life. Their view of White people was constructed from those Peace Corps workers they had encountered or those they saw on the one television channel in the country which played translated versions of old American sitcoms such as *The Incredible Hulk* and *Days of Our Lives*. Thus, as a White female, I found my definitions of safety and Biblical living dramatically challenged. Safety was not found in personal actions but in relationships with the local people. Biblical living required reframing within a village and market setting where cheating, for example, was seen as not sharing answers with others and stealing was withholding something from someone in need.

Three years after arriving, I left West Africa radically changed. Unlike when I arrived, I left embracing ambiguity; the value of questions replaced my value of knowing the answers. The dialogue in which I had participated intrapersonally throughout this overseas experience gave me permission to not understand behavior and thought. This provoked a pursuit of inquiry instead of a pursuit of answers, thus enriching my interpersonal dialogue in my professional life in higher education.

### **The African American Researcher's Voice**

Over the years I have decided that people who do not bother to talk to me place me in three identity categories: a Black woman, a light-skinned Black woman, or mixed person of color. The reality is race is a major part of my identity. During my diversity training sessions and presentations to students, faculty, and others, I begin with a poem that I wrote when I finally decided how to define my true identity.

It took me years to understand who I am as a Black woman in America and at least seven years to find my identity in academia as a female and black college professor.

Growing up the youngest and the lightest of three siblings, my race was an evident attribute in my life. My father is a preacher, was the President of the local NAACP, and was considered one of the most prominent community members in our town who spoke up against racism and equality. Instilled in me was the desire to speak up for my rights and understand that I have rights just like every other American citizen. In hindsight, as a child I remember most the comments made about my light skin were by both White kids and darker complexioned Black kids in my school. I was called a “nigger” by some of the White kids and a “White girl” by one or two of the Black boys. It got confusing, frustrating, and impossible at times. However, as I grew up and attended high school, my complexion took on a new meaning with the guys. I was cute and often referred to as a Black man's dream because of my light skin; they called me a “red bone” and felt that they were complimenting me. On the other hand, by several of the darker complexioned females I was rejected. However, as I reflect, I have to say it was more than just a “skin thing.” I was very popular and the only Black student in my high school taking college prep classes and an athlete, so they may have been jealous of it

all, but my skin was the primary target in their racial epithets. If they only knew the hours I would spend in the sun baking with a bottle of baby oil rubbed on my skin in 101 degree sun, trying to get darker.

I was unidentified.

Finally, I grew up, not just numerically but intellectually, and started to research and understand the true meaning of education, race, and culture in the world. Beginning my teaching career in Virginia, I was determined to be the best multicultural educator out there. I believed in the practice and the pedagogy. Each year my fifth graders passed the standardized test, and it was not because I taught to the test, but because I taught each student using critical multicultural practices. I understood the true meaning of diversity.

It was not until I went to Hawaii and began teaching as the only African American educator at a local school that I experienced overt racism like I had when I was a child. I was called a “nigger” by two White teachers at the school and numerous Black, mixed, Latino, and other people of color approached me for advice and conversations surrounding race in Hawaii. It was at that crossroad that I pursued my Ph.D., and as the only African American student in my program’s cohort, it was quite interesting. Often I felt like my presence intimidated other students in the program because when discussions on race came up in class, a silence filled the room; they were constrained and avoided the topic. That was when I decided to employ my experiences and begin conversations about race and racism in America. Fellow classmates and professors were so happy that I did this, and the conversations led to many new friendships, a few enemies, but an abundance of cultural awareness and knowledge among educators. In Hawaii, race was the center of my world, as usual. When I arrived in Hawaii I was on top of the world above the rainbows that filled the perfect sky. My journey there revealed to me that the local culture placed my Black culture somewhere under the rainbow. I searched for African American history and its proper place in the islands. From that experience alone I realized that I cannot allow society to define who I am as a Black woman in America. I had to hold true to my cultural identity and educate others about who we are, where we came from, and what we believe. When I left Hawaii, I was sad because at some point in my journey “they,” the people with one whom I interacted, “got it,” “it” being race and diversity.

My first experiences of being a college professor occurred in Hawaii. The atmosphere was diverse with an array of races and ethnicities. Students were respectful and did not focus on my race; they were intrigued by my degree and level of expertise. However, when I arrived in Pennsylvania, the atmosphere in my college classroom environments were different from what I had experienced in Hawaii. The majority, if not all of my students were White and/or female. During my first class meeting several of the students stated that they had never had a Black college professor before. One student admitted that the only experience with a Black teacher had been in high school and she did not like to reflect because the teacher was over confident. Other students seemed interested in my background and the fact that I had lived in Hawaii. I told them to ask me anything. Several began to ask about race, others asked about the meaning of diversity, and others sat in silence. There were moments of silence and I told them gently and nicely, I am a black woman. Now that this is out of the way, are you ready to learn? Some chuckled. Others sat in silence.

I believe that at that moment race was my primary identifier.

Race and ethnicity are the most evident cultural attributes in my life from childhood to my current status as a “researcher and critical race theorist.” I examine race in all situations to determine if there is a link or a border between myself and those that I am researching. My experiences influence how I interpret data. There are both internal and external reflecting, ongoing realizations of responses to situations that present fewer constraints and conflicts. In recognizing that race is an essential component in society that can engage individuals in conversations and personal experiences, I strive to achieve credibility in each study I conduct.

## **Method**

### **Narrative Analysis**

For this qualitative study a narrative analysis was pursued as the participants’ and the researchers’ stories of their lived experiences with culture and diversity were the data to be explored (Creswell, 2009). This qualitative approach provided an appropriate way to explore the participants’ and researchers’ narratives relating their personal past and present experiences of culture and diversity while providing for the use of both the Socio-constructivism and Critical Race theoretical frameworks (Janesick, 2004). Additionally, this narrative analysis was effective for interpreting and analyzing recorded experiences individually and across cases while providing for the interpretive framework of both researchers’ theoretical perspectives (Patton, 2002).

### **Setting and Participants**

The majority of the teachers, however, in this region are Caucasian. For this study, in-service teachers from two university campuses of the same predominantly White university who were participating in the African American researcher’s (Kimetta) graduate level Foundations of Education course were invited to participate.

Sixty-four participants - 60 females (57 Caucasian, 1 African American, and 2 Latinas) and four Caucasian males taking the same Curriculum Foundation course with the African American professor (Kimetta) agreed to participate in this study. Over 60% of the participants came from a rural geographic location in which the public schools were currently experiencing an increase in minority students from nearby urban areas.

### **Procedures Collection**

Autobiographical exercises are commonly pursued within Foundations of Education courses. In this study an exercise called the Cultural Learning Process (CLP) was introduced within such a course (Cushner et al., 2003). The instrument used in this study to gather the teachers’ narratives was The Culture Learning Process (CLP). This CLP is a tool that was used as a voluntary exercise within her courses for teachers to have the opportunity to take an in-depth look at their diverse and cultural experiences by reflecting on 12 cultural attributes (Cushner et al.). Participants are asked to sign a consent form in order to use the data and are informed that names are omitted. They have

the opportunity to choose whether or not to be involved in the data collection, however all chose to participate. An IRB was submitted to the Human Subject Board for approval.

As interaction between teachers and students is vital in the learning process, it is important for these teachers to take time to reflect on their experience with culture and diversity that informs their practice. One effective way to hear these experiences and their interaction with these is through the use of story (Bruner, 1986). This instrument is intended for the participants to reflect upon their construction of culture and diversity through personal narratives as they share experiences within each cultural attribute resulting in writing their stories.

Over a six year period, the CLP has been used as a tool in the African American researcher's courses and diversity training sessions. After receiving an exemption from the IRB Board, permission was sought from participants prior to collecting the CLP. At the end of this voluntary assignment/activity, those who wished to consent and share their written responses in the CLP turned the assignment in to the instructor. They were asked to omit their names on the copy turned in with the only identifiable marker being the geographical location of where the CLP was conducted. All participants chose to hand in the CLP document (names omitted) and give their consent to share the information. After collected, the CLP's received an alphabet letter in random order in order for the researchers to organize them and keep them identified by the collection location.

Diversity and culture were clearly defined for the teachers prior to the CLP. Culture was defined as values and beliefs that are inclusive of entities that distinguish an individual's behaviors and experiences. Diversity was defined as differences which are related to identities, subjectivities, experiences, ideologies, and cultures that impact the experiences of an individual. Subsequently, all 64 teachers participating in a master's level course were given the opportunity to reflect on and write their stories. Their narratives recounted how the cultural attributes of race, ethnicity/nationality, social class, sex/gender, health, age, geographic region, sexuality, religion, social status, language, and ability/disability were evident in their lives, locating their narratives within their past, present, and future experiences, as they perceived them. Thus, the participants were asked to reflect on the attributes as a child and then re-reflect on the attributes as an adult/teacher.

## **Analysis**

The data were analyzed to effectively capture the teachers' interpretations of their encounters with culture and diversity in their lives over time. This analysis occurred in two phases. In the first phase each researcher identified key words and phrases, themes, and categories of similarities and differences found in each narrative (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Subsequently, the researchers spent time comparing and contrasting their findings. To enhance trustworthiness the researchers negotiated their understanding. The pursuant dialog between researchers was captured and transcribed. These were added to the teacher data as new data.

In a second phase, the resulting data were further analyzed for keywords and emerging themes by each researcher utilizing her chosen theoretical framework. Kimetta analyzed the data using the Critical Race theoretical lens and Martha analyzed the data

using the socio-constructivist lens. To enhance credibility these findings were again compared and contrasted by both researchers in dialogue.

This analysis process provided for both the voices of the teachers and researchers to be heard. It also fostered a dialogue between researchers which exposed the themes of growth and constraint when constructing understanding of culture and diversity within individual storylines (Gee, 2005).

### **Limitations**

A limitation that existed in the study was that the researchers did not have access to the participants to speak with them about their narratives. However, this limitation resulted in the link to the researcher's sharing their experiences and interacting with one another regarding their own beliefs, values, and perceptions for the purpose of enhancing their cultural awareness among themselves.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Upon examination of the teachers' narratives relating their past and present experiences with 12 attributes of culture, a common story emerged. This storyline was connected by four key themes that were shared by all not only in content but also in their word choice. These were (a) past family prejudice, (b) religious definition, (c) values of comfort and safety, and (d) external other. What follows is the description of how these themes were heard evidenced throughout the data through each researcher's theoretical framework.

### **Teacher Storylines as Seen by Martha**

As Caucasian teachers who lived and went to school in the same rural region in which they now work, they grew up with parents or grandparents who voiced strong opinions regarding people of other colors and cultural backgrounds than their own. This was reflected in the common expressions of "stereotyping" and "prejudice" found throughout their narratives when recounting exposure to race in their past. This was also expressed in their recounting of restrictions in relating to or having any contact with people with different cultural backgrounds from their own. The common statement was they were not allowed to interact with people of different backgrounds.

Their story continued with descriptions of their religious background, which commonly included church attendance and an expressed belief in a higher power. Principles of the Bible were reported as guiding their role in their family, their sexual life, and understanding of gender and accepting differences in others. The language chosen to describe their choices within their past was declarative in nature, such as, "My role is determined in the home."

Within their narratives the teachers also referred to shared values. They often talked about comfort and safety. They referred to living in the same region where they grew up as comfortable and predictable. The value of comfort permeated their narratives when they talked about everything from geographic location to health and encounters with abilities and disabilities. In each narrative written by Caucasian female teachers, comfort and safety were voiced as a part of their past and a goal for their future. Anyone

or thing that seemingly threatened these values was denounced as something to be avoided.

These narratives also reflected a sense of de-personalizing or externalizing the other. They portrayed people different from themselves as standing outside their world. Their choice of language reflected their construction of such people as if they were viewing them from an objective distance. They conclude their story by stating their approach to those with different backgrounds and experiences as ones to be valued and seen as “equal” and “no different.”

This construction of the other is notable, exposing an internal conflict. As their narratives of their family’s past prejudice are juxtaposed upon their present analysis of how others are to be accepted as “no different” or valued as “the same as anyone,” there arises a dissonance. Their experience in life appears to have not provided a space wherein they provide for difference. There is no evidence that they found an opportunity to co-construct meaning and roles with people different from themselves. Although their struggle to reconcile the past with their present situation as teachers is exposed within these narratives, the value of safety and comfort appeared to be the stronghold that kept unfamiliar experiences and people in another world that was cognitively explored but not emotionally or personally encountered. As is pointed out by Wells (1999), when dialogue is given space to interpersonally and intrapersonally interact, learning can occur. It appears that these storied lives have constructed worlds that remain separate from diverse views and ways of life, leaving any intrapersonal and interpersonal interaction apart from their experience.

But all our stories, as Bruner (1996) would quickly point out, are dynamic, never stagnant, never the same. The life of these storied lives was given breath when the researchers analyzed the teachers’ narratives. Sleeter (2008) noted that when listening to others’ stories “it is important not to attempt to draw sweeping generalizations from any story, but rather to allow the stories to converse, and the disjunctions to sit alongside one another, generating questions for further consideration” (p. 122). These conversations were given space and voice not only as each teacher interacted with his or her story, but also as a researcher and professor entered this dialogic space with their stories, exposing the multiple voices. It is within this multidimensional context that a construction of culture emerged.

### **Teacher’s Storylines as Seen by Kimetta**

During the analysis of the data, the following concepts; (a) past family prejudice, (b) religious definition, (c) values of comfort and safety, and (d) external other - were analyzed through the lens of race. Although they are listed in this particular order, the following analysis reveals these concepts as they arose in the participants’ experiences and were developed through the narratives.

As the Caucasian teachers reflected and on the 12 cultural attributes, it became apparent that their past experiences with race had a major impact on their present identity. Race was the first attribute discussed and shaped the conversation for many of the other comments in the process, and many of the comments stemmed from past family prejudices. For example, several of the teachers indicated that they were not raised around black people or other minorities and admitted that they only heard about “those

people” during dinner conversations or family gatherings. Often during these conversations, stereotypical jokes or comments were made and often considered as “a joke” among their families. One participant (E) stated, “I was raised by family members who were raised in a time when Hispanics and African-Americans were “not equal” to white Americans.” Unaware that this statement was racist, the participant also discussed language and referred to Hispanics as “needing to learn” our language, all the while not identifying her race. Tatum (2009) explains, “Many whites simply do not acknowledge their racial category as personally significant” (p. 284). Moreover when this occurred individuals employed ethnocentric views and harmful stereotypes (Delgado, 1989).

However, during in the part of the process when the participants talk about their past experiences they stated that they were Caucasian, White, or from a White society, however, they immediately referenced not growing up around black people, talking about diversity, referring stereotypes heard by others or as being colorblind. They equated race with racism and prejudice. Participant (H) made it clear: “I was raised in a rural community that was predominantly white, and I had two African-American friends...Today I teach at a multicultural school.” As described by Tatum (2009) in her three models of whiteness, the third model is “guilty white,” which implies there is a heightened awareness of racism, and embarrassment is attached to it.

It was through these statements that the values of comfort and safety arose within internal reflections of the participant’s self that incorporated the reflection on the religion attribute. Looking through the lens of CRT, the “guilty white” model continued to surface. When discussing the personal attributes such as race, ethnicity, and language, many related these responses to experiences with other people from other cultures or within their upbringing. However, it is important to note that religion attribute was often defined and reflected upon the most in the process to heighten moral values and beliefs. Many students made reference to how they were raised by their parents in the race and gender attributes, and then provided a detailed response to their upbringing in the religion attribute. Several participants found comfort in their religious upbringing and beliefs. As an example, one participant stated, “Even though religion does not play a role in the public education system, I rely strongly on my Catholic faith each and every day. Each morning I pray for my students and my ability to help each and every child realize the gifts they have within them” (Participant M). During the analysis of both the race and religion attributes, participants verbalized emotional connections and experiences when discussing students, education, and past family upbringing.

Three emotions seemed evident amid the participants when discussing race in the context. Frustration, guilt, and shame came out when they talked about issues of diversity, curriculum, and experiences with other racial groups. Within the dialogue most of the teachers managed to find a comfort and safety zone in explaining their current educational practices. Several provided examples of their current classroom practices that they felt were multicultural or that utilized differentiated instruction. Others stated that due to the CLP, they were more aware of cultural differences and planned on implementing more diversity in their classrooms in the future. At this point in the analysis the external conflicts began evident. No matter how safe and comfortable the participants described their values and beliefs, the “guilty white” model surfaced repeatedly through ethnocentric and external “othering.” Christian (1985) asserts that in America, “the image of “Other” provides an ideological justification for race, gender and

class oppression. Marking a person as “Other” contributes to the process of dehumanization.

As the stories unfolded, there were several realizations brought to light. As Delgado (1989) points out, a realization is the use of voice or “naming your reality” (p. 156). As the process of critically reflecting on past experiences occurred for the teachers, both conscious and unconscious values, beliefs, and behaviors about race surfaced within ethnocentric comments, personal perceptions, and past family experiences. All of these in some way or another impacted the present day teacher identity.

### **Storylines in Dialogue**

According to Vygotsky (1978), construction of meaning within a socio-historical context takes place both interpersonally as well as intrapersonally. This means that learning takes place in dialogue with others as well as in dialogue with oneself. Bakhtin’s (1986) concept of multivoicedness illuminates this intrapersonal process. According to Bakhtin, each person appeals to multiple voices scripted from past interactions to construct meaning in any present encounter. These voices are constructed to form one’s identity and position on issues being addressed. Bruner (1986) noted that people’s thoughts consist of either storytelling (narratives) or argumentation (propositional thinking). Bruner (1996) noted the imaginable characteristic of one’s stories in contrast to the logical scientific reasoning of the argument. Thus, the narrator of one’s story is multivoiced constructed within a space of dialogue and imagination, thus conceptualized as dialogical.

According to Delgado (1989), and stated earlier, Critical Race Theory is a venue for “naming your reality,” and the voices that emerge from the research offers insight and value to social construction, self-preservation, and ways in which those who are listening can overcome ethnocentrism (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Moreover, Bell (2009) emphasizes that through narratives, hearing different perspectives and the use of race to interlock with other cultural attributes in order to understand those who are consistently marginalized by others promotes discussions of race and culture in academia. Realizations are socially constructed, and in order to have one, stories about experiences need to occur. The key to the prior statement, however, is the exchange of the stories from the teller to the listener, and as Delgado (1989) suggests, these conversations assist individuals in overcoming ethnocentrism and one-sided perceptions of culture. Storylines in dialogue provide the necessary context for interpretations, emotions, and internal reflections (Ladson-Billing). Moreover, the descriptions of experiences that are within personal narratives enhance the dialogic self.

### **Constructing Culture**

The key issue that emerged from the analysis of the data was the manner in which culture was conceptualized. Historically culture has been conceptualized in a number of ways. Early on it was defined by patterns of behaviors such as is reflected in the early work of Ruth Benedict (1934). In the 1950s, as culture was seen as also including knowledge and symbols, this previous paradigm was challenged. As Shweder (1984) pointed out in his summary of the evolution of defining culture, three views emerged:

culture as knowledge, culture as conceptual structures, and culture with a social construct.

In the contemporary conceptualization of hybridization, cultures are seen as interacting and interwoven, not defined by geopolitical boundaries (McCarthy, 1998). This contemporary understanding of culture celebrates complexity and moves beyond the geopolitical understanding of culture as found in much of today's school practice. It moves the conversation from a "west versus rest" mentality to such concepts as "cultural flows" as conceived by Appadurai (1999).

As the world's borders give way to cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996) and as there are people groups which are transnational in lifestyle (Levitt, 2001), it is becoming more and more difficult to define cultural borders and patterns. A recognition of the contradictory and fluidity of our beliefs and actions across borders is noted by Yon (2000) in his study on race and schooling resulting in identifying the concept of culture as "elusive."

Spradlin and Parsons (2008) viewed culture in terms of dialogue as the way it affects individuals' thinking and behavior. They then compared dialogues and responses and found that culture is a key factor in decision making, speaking up for what is right, shaping perceptions, and bringing to light conversations that often stay hidden. They emphasized that through cultural dialogue, teachers begin to understand cultural values of others, but more important, "they increase their awareness of the values, beliefs, and cultural experience that shape their own lives" (Spradlin & Parsons, p. 6). In this study, the researchers found the teachers constructing their concept of culture as dynamic – not one static definition but sharing multiple definitions.

### **A Perspective of Constraints**

Just as Barnes (2000) noted that narratives expose the tensions, disruptions, and inventions of the narrators, so we found our own concepts of culture and diversity, located within a dialogic space of constraint. The beauty of academia is the diverse array of disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and research approaches that individuals bring to the table. As two female professors in education who are also researchers, constraints and limitations for both arose in the development of this paper as we examined the data through our different theoretical perspectives.

Comfort levels within both views appeared constrained during the discussing topics like race, ethnicity, and culture. There were moments when we found it was uncomfortable to discuss race and ethnicity through experiences. Although we would like to attribute this to the different theoretical perspectives we brought into the dialogue, our narratives (recounted earlier in this paper) told a different story. Not unlike the teachers, we too had experiences in our past through which we had constructed stereotypes that we both found to be defined by skin color. For Martha, encounters with Blacks growing up and in West Africa precipitated her struggle with defining safety, and religious thought. For Kimetta, growing up as a black female in the South gave her constant access to experiences of racism and color discrimination and which led to the normalizing of race as being a key in researching societal differences and the development of individual perceptions.

We found our interactions to be constrained by these past experiences more than perhaps expected. As this became clear we found our ability to critically reflect and discuss issues of differences in cultural interpretations and awareness to grow.

**Martha's Reflection:**

When I consider the teachers' narratives and the challenging interaction between researchers I am reminded of how the concepts of culture and diversity are socially and historically embedded in each of us organized by labels or categories such as individualism or collectivism. At the same time, however, within interactions these are found to be always under construction. With each dialogue, at each time our story is told, new meanings are negotiated and given voice. Therefore, when confronted by teacher narratives regarding culture gathered during a learning exercise, it becomes all too easy, as researchers, to glean the labels and categories from the words without protecting the on-going process of construction that is occurring even as each tells his or her story. The challenge, therefore, is to create a space in which the multiple voices of all participants and researchers are exposed and addressed, resulting in embracing dissonance and ambiguity framed in questions instead of answers – a place that feels foreign to most teachers.

**Kimetta's Reflection:**

Writing with a colleague from a similar, and yet so different, background displays the importance of this paper, and more importantly it confirms the depth of understanding individual perceptions and experiences in life and in education. Dewey (1938) points out, "It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, nor even activity in experience. Everything depends on the quality of the experience which is had" (p. 7). This experience allowed me to reflect internally and provide a foundation to others of how race, culture, and reflection are essential in understanding and moving toward a more diverse mindset.

### **Conclusions**

From both the Critical Race and the Socio-constructivist theoretical perspectives, the analysis of the participants revealed essential links to narratives, however, the impact of our (the researchers) experiences and knowledge shaped the dialogic space that needed to be explored, discussed, and debated through conversations. This study illustrates how locating culture and diversity in education and research can provide for open dialogue for individuals to have personal reflections about their upbringing using cultural attributes to guide them. Then, they begin to reflect on personal experiences and their perceptions of others leading them to the discovery of hidden "isms" within an individual's family and self. Sharing those experiences and then learning from them can create a path to understanding and respecting cultural differences. There are moments of discomfort

within the space, however, this space reframes the teacher/research dialogue on culture by moving beyond definitions and answers to the construction of questions and inquiry embedded in growth, not constraint.

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