

# Mindful Reflection as a Process for Developing Culturally Responsive Practices

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Becoming a culturally responsive educator has been at the forefront of the movement to reduce inappropriate referrals to special education and disproportionate representation of students of color within special education (Fiedler, Chiang, Van Haren, Jorgensen, Halberg, & Boreson, 2008; National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, 2005). However, for many educators, working with a diverse student population can be more difficult when the student comes from a background that is unfamiliar to the teacher (Harry & Klingner, 2006). As teacher educators who prepare educators for inclusionary settings in diverse urban areas, we have noticed that issues often arise when a teacher or teacher candidate attempts to make meaning of behavior in the classroom, particularly a behavior that concerns student engagement, classroom management, or discipline of students with whom the teacher has a cultural disconnect. Teachers are not often aware of how diversity affects the way that they interpret students' actions and the ways that they interact with their stu-

dents. Teachers may misinterpret a cultural difference as a potential disability.

- How does diversity influence teachers' perceptions of behavior?
- Is there a way to use a process of mindful reflection and communication (Langer, 1989; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000a) to help support the development of culturally responsive practices?

## What Does Diversity Mean to Teachers?

Cultural diversity is a dynamic and relational reality that exists between persons rather than within any single person. For this reason, its challenge lies not so much in different behaviors as in the diverse meanings attributed to those behaviors. (Barrera & Corso, 2003, p. 3)

We agree with Barrera and Corso (2003) that diversity is never problematic in and of itself but "it is the response of individuals and institutions to diversity that can be problematic" (p. 8). A teacher can understand or

misunderstand his or her diverse social world in many ways. These understandings and misunderstandings are attributable to differences in gender, race, class, geographic location, language, religion, family structures, abilities, and family and personal history. These myriad differences make diversity a way of life rather than a problem to be solved or fixed by casting the other as deficient. Instead, a teacher should view diversity as an opportunity to expand his or her understanding of himself or herself and the world.

Before a teacher can accept and embrace diversity in the classroom, he or she must reflect on the challenges that can interfere with acceptance. For example, educators overidentify students of color, particularly African Americans, in the category of emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD), although these students are underrepresented in the category of learning disabilities (LD; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Neal, McCray, & Webb-Johnson, 2003). Students of color also continue to experience higher rates of discipline referrals, as well as lower academic achievement (Drakeford, 2006; King,



Harris-Murri, & Artiles, 2006). Some have argued that these outcomes occur partially because of the potential cultural, racial, and economic mismatch with the primarily White middle-class teaching force (Cartledge, Singh, &

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Gibson, 2008; Garcia & Ortiz, 2006). This argument suggests that without direct attention to cultural and individual differences in the classroom, some students, including those labeled LD or EBD, have limited opportunities to succeed. One recommendation that is central to the process discussed in this article is to assist teachers in develop-

ing reflective practices to gain a deeper understanding of institutions, personal assumptions, and common communication patterns that create tensions and misunderstandings between teachers and their students (e.g., Barrera &

Corso, 2003; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999).

**Teacher Reflections:  
Confronting Bias in  
Classroom Interactions**

In special education, scholars and educators have recognized the need for teachers to be sensitive to diversity in

the classroom; this sensitivity requires that teachers look inward and reflect on their personal assumptions and biases (e.g., Fiedler et al., 2008; King et al., 2006; Wisneski & Dray, 2009). Kendall (1996) calls for teachers to take the “emotional risk” to examine their deeply held beliefs that can affect how they treat students. She suggests that this inward reflection requires being willing to listen and change to respond to the student who may be different in some way. Jacobson (2003) asks teachers to confront their discomfort through self-reflection and become aware of the prejudices and biases that everyone may have. Ramsey (2004) states, “we need to know ourselves—to honestly see our reactions to other individuals and the larger world and to analyze our underlying assumptions” (p. 20). In each case, there is the

### What Is the Deficit Thinking Model?

In the deficit thinking model, teachers believe that students fail in school because of the student's own deficiencies, not because of unfair school policies or differential treatment from teachers. A deficit perspective situates school failure within the student and suggests that deficiencies exist within the student or his or her home life and that these deficiencies are the cause of academic failure. Another common deficit perspective attributes student failure to parents and families who do not value education. As a result, teachers' attributions that are rooted in a deficit perspective guide an often ill-informed understanding that a student's failures are attributable to the student's perceived lack of ability, linguistic inferiority, or family dysfunction (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Valencia, 1997).

understanding that assumptions about various types of diversity in society are heavily value-laden and potentially harmful to students.

One example of negative attitudes toward some students and families is the *deficit thinking model* (Valencia, 1997; see box, "What Is the Deficit Thinking Model?"). Deficit thinking is an outcome of inaccurate and often negative attributions about students or their families. It is an unexamined prejudice often directed at students of color or from low socioeconomic backgrounds, even by teachers who may consider themselves supportive advocates of such students. Therefore, teachers need to self-reflect to unpack attributions that are potentially linked to racism, power, or privilege so that they can work more effectively and fairly with diversity in the classroom.

### Reconsidering Communication in the Classroom

In addition to reflecting on personal beliefs, teachers may need to reconsider how they communicate with students in the classroom. According to Ramsey (2004, p. 56), "effective communication requires paying close attention to what others are saying both verbally and nonverbally and genuinely trying to see and understand their perspectives, as we are making oneself understood." Effective communication requires teachers to analyze not only students' behaviors but also their own behaviors and ways of communicating.

In intercultural communication theories, mindfulness is a core concept used to help individuals reframe and reinterpret unfamiliar behavior or ways of communicating to understand rather than to judge others (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). According to the work of Langer (1989), mindfulness is the ability to be conscious about communication with others. It is the process of purposefully responding to others by moving away from automatic-pilot or mindless responses that are based on a person's own cultural frames of reference. Automatic pilot is the process in which a person is not conscious or aware of her or his responses to others. Automatic pilot, or scripted behavior, serves well in familiar situations but not in intercultural communication. "The problem of misinterpreting strangers' behavior is compounded when we communicate with strangers because we tend to interpret strangers' behavior on the basis of our own frames of reference" (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003, p. 283).

Attributions are the explanations that people may give to a behavior (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). They are the way that a person attributes or gives meaning to why people behave the way that they do, and attributions guide how a person responds to the behavior of others. A person who is aware of his or her attributions and takes time to reflect on them can minimize misattribution or misinterpretation of why someone behaves the way that he or she does.

Additionally, a person's cultural frame of reference or cultural background, as well as life experiences, guides how a person responds to others. When a person's cultural background and/or life experiences are vastly different from those of people with whom he or she is interacting, there is a risk for a culture clash or misunderstanding of cultures that can lead to conflict or misattribution (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Therefore, teachers within diverse communities should become highly aware of their personal cultural background and lens for understanding behavior, as well as cultural norms or tendencies of others, so that they can reduce attributions that lead to prejudice, deficit thinking, and overgeneralizations.

Gudykunst and Kim (2003) suggest that there are three cognitive processes, or types of attributions involved in the perception of communicating with others: description, interpretation, and evaluation.

1. *Description* is an account of what a person observed or experienced that does not attribute social significance to the behavior. It includes what the person heard and saw. People typically gather descriptions by observational data, counting, or anecdotal records. For example, "Enrique raised his hand 10 times during the story read-aloud" is a description of what occurred in the classroom.
2. *Interpretation* is the process of inferring what the behavior meant, thus attributing social significance to the behavior. Educators must remember that behaviors can have multiple interpretations. For example, at least three separate interpretative statements are possible for the descriptive example "Enrique raised his hand 10 times during story read-aloud": (a) Enrique was disruptive during story read-aloud; (b) Enrique enjoyed the story; or (c) Enrique wanted attention.
3. *Evaluation* is the process of attributing positive or negative social significance to a behavior. For example, the interpretive statement

“Enrique wants attention” as an evaluative statement could vary from “I don’t like that; Enrique needs to learn better turn-taking skills” to “I like that Enrique takes initiative to participate during read-alouds.” It is important to recognize that attributions can be negative or positive and may lead to overgeneralizations and prejudice, which classroom teachers should minimize.

### **Process for Mindful Reflection and Communication**

Reacting to students’ behavior on automatic pilot by jumping to conclusions or making assumptions about students’ behaviors is very easy to do in the context of a busy school day. When teachers have difficulty interacting with students in the classroom, emotions and assumptions can cloud perceptions; likewise, teachers are more likely to give a student the benefit of the doubt when clashes occur if the student behaves in a way that the teacher desires. Therefore, just as teachers of students with disabilities often take anecdotal notes or keep running records of students’ academic performance for assessment purposes, these same skills are necessary when reflect-

The following example of a teacher who used the process of mindful reflection and communication to unpack attributions of a student whom she perceived as having troubling behavior draws on the work of Carol Archer, who frames the prevention of culture clashes as the culture bump process (see Archer, 1990, 2003); and Ellen Langer, who has researched the importance of mindfulness as a tool for prejudice reduction (see Langer, 1989; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000b). We developed this process and the vignette as a result of our collective experiences working with teachers to help them rethink troubling behavior in the classroom and learn to respond differently. Teachers often have deep concern for students who are easily distracted or disruptive during classroom activities, yet they often interpret students’ perceived troubling behavior as a dysfunction of the student instead of examining alternative explanations for the behavior (e.g., lack of eye contact in one culture might indicate high respect; whereas in another, it might indicate lack of respect). We use this common concern to walk through the process of understanding the deeper meaning of behavior in the classroom by introducing and applying a process

to mend taking a moment to ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I already interpreted the behavior?
- Am I making assumptions about why the student behaves the way that he or she does?
- Have I already passed judgment on whether the behavior was good or bad? Stop and describe what you and the student said and did and in what order.
- What leads you to believe that the behavior was wrong or desirable?
- What about the behavior leads to your interpretation?

Isolated incidents rarely paint the clearest picture of the situation, so teachers should collect notes on at least three incidents of student behavior over an extended period of time (at least over a 2–4 week period) and at different times of the day (e.g., across content areas and different instructional settings). The educator must not blame or label the student or the behavior. The emphasis is on listening, observing to understand, and being willing to learn something new and different. The following description of Ms. Marten’s experience demonstrates this process:

Ms. Marten first mentioned to her mentor teacher that Antwan was disruptive during small-group guided reading. When Ms. Marten’s mentor asked her to describe exactly how Antwan was disruptive, Ms. Marten restated that Antwan read along while she conducted guided reading and then began to tell a story about what he had done on the weekend.

### **Step 2: Write Out and Reflect on Your Feelings and Thoughts When Working With the Student**

Take into account potential issues of deficit thinking, prejudice, and overgeneralizations. After a teacher has recalled the interaction, she or he may also reflect on her or his attitudes and feelings toward the student during the interaction. As Jacobson (2003)

### **Just as teachers of students with disabilities often take anecdotal notes or keep running records of students’ academic performance for assessment purposes, these same skills are necessary when reflecting on attributions about students in the classroom.**

ing on attributions about students in the classroom. Similar to the process of operationalizing behavior (that is, describing behavior so that it is observable and measurable) during a functional behavior analysis, we invite teachers to think about how they can understand the deeper meaning of behavior in daily classroom interactions of students who may or may not be labeled with a disability but who present behavior challenges in the classroom.

for mindful reflection and communication. The following case study describes and illustrates each step of the process by using a situation in which Ms. Marten (the classroom teacher) is reflecting with a mentor teacher on her attributions about a student.

### **Step 1: Explain the Attributions That You Have About the Student**

When unpacking attributions about students in the classroom, we recom-



suggests, educators must constantly engage in self-reflection about their assumptions and attitudes toward students. If they are to imagine alternative possibilities to relating to others, they must acknowledge the depths of their perspectives. Teachers can ask themselves the following questions:

- What attributes am I assigning to the student?
- Have I evaluated, interpreted, or described the behavior?
- How does this student make me feel?
- What are my worries or fears?
- What are my assumptions—why do I find the student’s behavior problematic?

At this point, the teacher has acknowledged his or her prejudices or deficit thinking, despite the difficulty and uncomfortable feelings that this reflection may reveal. The teacher reflects on and rewrites interpretive or evaluative statements in descriptive terms and begins to rethink why she or he responded to the student in a particular way.

Ms. Marten asked herself, “Have I already interpreted the student’s behavior? What leads me to believe that Antwan did not follow directions?” She then realized that she was not describing the behavior but instead had already interpreted Antwan’s behavior or his actions, so she started to rethink and describe:

“He was mimicking—no wait, he was reading along while I read to the group, and then he began to tell a story about what he did on the weekend. Why do I perceive his behavior in a negative light? Mimic versus read-along? Why do I find his story inappropriate? Antwan is classified with a disability and he is African American: Am I making assumptions about his behavior? Do other students behave in a similar manner? How do I respond to other students in the class?”

### **Step 3: Consider Alternative Explanations by Reviewing Your Documentation and Reflections**

This next part of the process more deeply examines the ways in which the teacher communicates and perceives the student and situation and reconsiders the initial interpretations. Review the explanations, and reflect on the reasons that the student may be doing what he or she does. Consider how this student’s behavior is similar to or different from other behavior in the classroom. Teachers can ask themselves the following questions:

- What are my expectations for the situation?
- How is the student not meeting my expectations?
- In what way is the behavior interfering with learning?

Here Ms. Marten recognized that she was on automatic pilot when she became frustrated with the guided reading lesson because Antwan was not following the expected script of communication: the question-response-evaluation or teacher-student-teacher interaction in which the teacher asks a question, the student responds, and then the teacher responds with an evaluative statement relating to the student’s response. For example, the teacher asks, “What was the character doing?” The student answers, “He was eating.” The teacher then responds, “Good job, he was eating an apple” or “Almost, he was preparing food.”

Ms. Marten could reinterpret Antwan’s reading along with her while she read the story for guided reading as a clear attempt to show involvement and demonstrate his reading skills to indicate to his peers and to her that he could read too. Even though the process of guided reading includes the teacher reading alone rather than choral reading, Antwan could have been applying the rules from a previous lesson that involved choral reading. His storytelling after the read-

aloud, on deeper reflection, showed connection with an incident in the story about spending time with family on the weekends. Antwan could have been making connections with the content of the story by adding how the story connected with his personal life.

Ms. Marten began to recognize that she was viewing Antwan’s behavior only in negative terms at first, but she wanted to be more positive when responding to his actions. Ms. Marten remembered that when Sarah had read along during guided reading in another group, she welcomed that behavior because she saw it as an additional opportunity for Sarah to practice her reading; however, she thought that Antwan’s behavior was disruptive. Why? Was it his tone, dialect, fluency, racial background, gender, or some other factor? When Ms. Marten reflected further, she realized that his classification as EBD made her more suspicious of his behavior, and the fact that he was African American had positioned him (in her mind) as more likely to misbehave.

### **Step 4: Check Your Assumptions**

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the student’s family notice the same behavior at home?
- How do family members interact with the student at home?
- Have there been any major changes or upsets in the home?

Share your reflections with a colleague, parents, and/or community members. Meet with parents to learn more about expected and observed behaviors in the home.

After you have reflected on the behavior and developed alternative explanations as well as possible biases, check your assumptions with individuals with specialized training on working with diversity, staff members who are familiar with or from the local community/culture, parents, and community members who are familiar with

cultural norms of behavior. Consider talking with other professional personnel who specialize in multiculturalism, English as a second language (ESL), or bilingual education. Be wary of colleagues or informants who blame the student, community, or home life for the student's behavior; instead you want someone who understands the deeper meaning of behavior and can offer alternative explanations (e.g., cultural, linguistic, interactional) that can help you unpack attributions and reframe them in a way that leads to productive solutions and positive outcomes for students.

Ms. Marten reviewed her reflections with her mentor teacher, who had studied multicultural perspectives in education and who had strong ties to the neighborhood community. She discussed her discomfort with some of the insights that she had uncovered related to Antwan's disability and racial background that may have clouded her understanding of his behavior in the classroom. Her mentor commended Ms. Marten for taking the risk and examining her biases and reminded Ms. Marten that she also needed to meet with Antwan's parents to ensure that she was interpreting the behavior appropriately.

Next, reach out to parents and families to learn more about their perceptions and ideas. Share your interpretations in a spirit of collaboration to learn from family members about their expectations and norms for behavior. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I operating from a different set of values or norms?
- How can I reach a middle ground?
- What are some alternative explanations or interpretations of the student's behavior?

When Ms. Marten met with Antwan's parents, they shared that they have a tight-knit family and that they attend a Baptist church regularly. On the weekends, the minister encourages the congregation to participate



through call-and-response sermons. Antwan's mother was a teacher's aide for students who struggle with reading, so she did many interactive literacy activities with Antwan because she found that he did better and was more motivated when he could actively participate. She had noticed that Antwan preferred to be interactive rather than remain quiet during activities. However, the mother also indicated that she was trying to teach him different routines and behavioral expectations.

#### **Step 5: Make a Plan**

Ask yourself the following questions:

- How can you change or respond differently?
- What additional resources do you need to implement the plan effectively?

After teachers have considered alternative explanations and developed a different interpretation of a situation, they are able to change their behavior. Teachers can experiment with responding differently, noting what happens and reflecting on their reactions and feelings, as well as on the student's response. The teacher should develop and implement a plan to change the classroom environment or his or her actions, and he or she should reexamine expectations for the student.

Ms. Marten decided to be proactive by giving explicit directions about class routines to Antwan before he asked. Ms. Marten decided to listen to Antwan's statements in class for content and focus on understanding what he was trying to communicate, rather than whether his immediate expression followed the typical teacher-student-

teacher response pattern. For example, instead of rejecting Antwan's comments if he did not raise his hand, Ms. Marten decided to respond to the meaning of his comment before reminding him to raise his hand, thereby recognizing and accepting his desire and attempts to participate in class discussions and lessons. At times she would pair a statement such as "I want to hear what you have to say, Antwan," with a statement such as, "Will you please raise your hand so that I can call on you?" Ms. Marten's intent in these statements was to help Antwan begin to learn the norms of the classroom.

Ms. Marten recognized that most of the classroom interactions were formal and focused primarily on the prescribed curriculum, so she structured group time and participation to include making personal connections and sharing opinions about material. As a result of talking to Antwan's mother, Ms. Marten incorporated more movement into her lessons. For example, during think-pair-share, she asked each student to first put an index finger on his or her temple during the individual think, then face a peer with knees touching and discuss a concept during pair, and sit side-by-side next to the peer with the palms of their hands together during share.

### **Step 6: Continuously Revisit This Process to Reassess Your Attributions and Your Progress With the Student**

Dealing with attributions in the classroom can be a complex and layered—and often uncomfortable—process, and educators should view dealing with attributions as an opportunity to learn more about others and about themselves. Therefore, educators must continuously review their relationship with the student and evaluate how their instruction and communication support the student's success in class. Educators should view this process as continuous and ongoing by revisiting each step as needed to ensure that all stu-

dents are experiencing success in the classroom.

After a few weeks of reflecting on her attributions about Antwan's behaviors, mindfully exploring alternative explanations, and interacting with him in more responsive ways, Ms. Marten noticed positive changes in his performance. Antwan entered the classroom with a smile. He talked more with her about his likes and dislikes. He participated in large-group activities, and he was more attentive and engaged when he worked with other students.

Ms. Marten also noticed a change in herself. She noticed that she was more aware when she began to overgeneralize or have prejudices about certain students, and she began to consider alternative views. She found herself often asking such questions as, "How can I understand this student better? What assumptions or values are guiding my interpretations?" instead of asking "Why won't this student behave?" or "Why can't she be more like the other students?"

### **Final Thoughts**

Although we have described this process of mindful communication and reflection within a special education context, we believe that the process can be applied across settings to help teachers develop a deeper understanding of students' behavior by reflecting on the environment, cultural underpinnings, and biases that may be interacting to create a mismatch in the classroom. The intention is to support teachers in a process of deep reflection that transforms historically deficit views and responses to students with disabilities or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, in addition to developing practices that are culturally responsive and ensure that all students are well supported and successful in the classroom.

In particular, the process of mindful reflection and communication can help teachers do the following:

- Evaluate their own assumptions, prejudices, and biases about race, culture, and disability and consider how they affect the teacher's interactions with and expectations for their students.
- Objectively describe behaviors without interpretation to consider appropriate and consistent ways of responding.
- Interpret behaviors to support rather than inhibit learning.
- Consider the many different ways that children demonstrate engagement and attentiveness, how these ways closely tie with culture, and how culture influences students' many ways of responding and interacting with others in the classroom.
- Recognize that children are children first and foremost and that their behaviors do not define them, and consider whether or why you have different behavioral expectations for different children.

The end goal of this process is to accomplish the following:

- Develop mindful relationships with children and their families to support learning through building on the students' strengths and assets instead of focusing on their delays or need.
- Recognize and teach in developmentally, contextually, and culturally appropriate ways of responding to the behavior of all children.
- Create a culturally and linguistically responsive and supportive learning community that recognizes and celebrates differences.

We hope that this process enables teachers to become aware of and recognize their own biases when interpreting behavior in the classroom so that they may use culturally and linguistically responsive practices. The concern is that when teachers act on automatic pilot or do not take the time to reflect, they may risk misinterpreting culture and language ability as disability. Figure 1 furnishes a summary of the steps for mindful reflection and



communication. We hope that this process assists teachers in understanding the role of their own cultural lens in examining student behavior to reduce the potential for them to interpret culture and language ability as disability.

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