I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., AUGUST 28, 1963

In second grade my classmates and I all read from the same Dick and Jane basal reader. I was chastised more than once for reading ahead. But during that year I was also chosen to attend a special reading class. Unlike today's remedial reading classes, that class was reserved for accelerated readers. We were a select group of about five or six students and we went to reading class each day for about thirty to forty minutes. There we read “real” books, not basal textbooks, about faraway places and interesting people.

Our teacher was Mrs. Gray, a tall, elegant African American woman who seemed to love children and the idea that she could expose them to new experiences. One Saturday just before Christmas break Mrs. Gray took the class downtown on the subway train to see the dancing fountains and the Christmas display at John Wanamaker's, Philadelphia's landmark department store. I had been in Wanamaker's many times to shop with my mother, but this was the first time I could remember being taken for the express purpose of being entertained. “Now remember,” admonished Mrs. Gray, “when we get downtown people will be looking at us. If you misbehave they're not going to say, look at those bad children. They're going to say look at those bad colored children!” She did not have to tell us twice. We knew that we
were held to a higher standard than other people. We knew that people would stare at us and that the stares would come because of our skin color. Despite the “burden of blackness,” it was a magical visit. I felt special. I felt important. I felt smart!

The Basics of Culturally Relevant Teaching

In this chapter I discuss the ways that the teachers in my study see themselves, their students, and their students’ parents. With each vignette I attempt to introduce the teachers individually and to share information about them—by way of interview comments and classroom observations—that illustrates their culturally relevant practices. Rather than attempt to show how all of the teachers demonstrate culturally relevant teaching in all of its aspects, I have selected examples that I believe are most illustrative of each aspect.

First, let us begin with a look at the many teachers who are reluctant to acknowledge racial differences or grapple with these and other differences in the classroom.

In her book White Teacher, Paley suggested that teachers must take care not to ignore color.1 When she moved to an integrated private school, an African American parent confronted her with the “knowledge” that her children were black and knew they were black, and she wanted that difference to be recognized as a comfortable and natural one. Delpit’s review of Paley’s book points to this as the beginning of “the journey toward acknowledging and valuing differences.”2

My own experiences with white teachers, both preservice and veteran, indicate that many are uncomfortable acknowledging any student differences and particularly racial differences. Thus some teachers make such statements as “I don’t really see color, I just see children” or “I don’t care if they’re red, green, or polka dot, I just treat them all like children.” However, these attempts at color-blindness mask a “dysconscious racism,” an “uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given.”3 This is not to suggest that these teachers are racist in the conventional sense. They do not consciously deprive or punish African American children on the basis of their race, but at the same time they are not unconscious of the ways in which some children are privileged and others are disadvantaged in the classroom. Their “dysconsciousness” comes into play when they fail to challenge the status quo, when they accept the given as the inevitable.

In an earlier study that illustrated this kind of behavior, preservice teachers were asked to explain the economic, social, and educational disparities that exist between white and African American children.4 Presented with data on African American and white children’s life chances, the students were asked three questions: How can you explain these disparities? What are some differing ideological explanations for these disparities? What can schools do about these disparities?

The students’ responses to the first question provide some telling insights. Most cited the fact that African Americans had been enslaved as the explanation for their present economic, social, and educational conditions. A few students suggested that African Americans’ failure to gain equal opportunities in the society explained the disparities. Only one student offered racism as an explanation.

The belief of the majority of the students—that African Americans’ enslavement more than a hundred years ago explains today’s disparities—suggests that they could not envision how conditions could be otherwise. The enslavement of African Americans is a part of history. Thus, according to this view, the past alone determines the future of a people. A more fundamental problem with this point of view in the classroom context is the following: If a teacher looks out at a classroom and sees the sons and daughters of slaves, how does that vision translate into her
expectations for educational excellence? How can teachers who see African American students as mere descendants of slaves be expected to inspire them to educational, economic, and social levels that may even exceed their own?

The usual antidote for this persistent view of African American children is for the viewer to pretend that he or she does not see the color that once forced their ancestors into slavery. Thus the teacher claims to be color-blind. However, such claims cannot be valid. Given the significance of race and color in American society, it is impossible to believe that a classroom teacher does not notice the race and ethnicity of the children she is teaching. Further, by claiming not to notice, the teacher is saying that she is dismissing one of the most salient features of the child’s identity and that she does not account for it in her curricular planning and instruction. Saying we are aware of students’ race and ethnic background is not the same as saying we treat students inequitably. The passion for equality in the American ethos has many teachers (and others) equating equality with sameness. An example may further clarify this point.

In a classroom of thirty children a teacher has one student who is visually impaired, one who is wheelchair-bound, one who has limited English proficiency, and one who is intellectually gifted. If the teacher presents identical work in identical ways to all of the students, is she dealing equitably or inequitably with the children? The visually impaired student cannot read the small print on an assignment, the wheelchair-bound student cannot do push-ups in gym, the foreign-language student cannot give an oral report in English, and the intellectually gifted student learns nothing by spelling words she mastered several years ago.

The notion of equity as sameness only makes sense when all students are exactly the same. But even within the nuclear family children born from the same parents are not exactly the same. Different children have different needs and addressing those different needs is the best way to deal with them equitably. The same is true in the classroom. If teachers pretend not to see students’ racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs.

Teachers with Culturally Relevant Practices Have High Self-Esteem and a High Regard for Others

Although my neighborhood was predominately African American, a few white families lived there. Most attended Catholic schools. It made sense to us; they were Catholic. One of the neighborhood white boys went to a private boarding school. His father had died, and this made him eligible for a private school for orphan boys (I guess a mother’s presence did not count in those days). The school he attended did not accept African American boys. (Many years later that school would become a battleground in the civil rights struggle in our city.) Only one white family, which consisted of seventeen children, sent their kids to my elementary school. They were extremely poor and often showed up unclean and unkempt. Everyone in the school community knew them and some felt a pang of sympathy for them, for as poor as we all were, we knew we were not quite as poor as they were.

But they seemed to take some comfort in the fact that although they were extremely poor at least they were not black. Every fight these children ever had came as a result of their calling one of the African American children “nigger.” We had to wonder who or what they thought we were. And what did that make them, since they were resigned to spending six hours of every school day with us?

One dimension of culturally relevant teaching is the teachers’ perceptions of themselves and others (see Table 3.1). Too often teachers have a poor opinion of themselves and their profession. In contrast, teachers who practice culturally relevant methods not only see themselves as professionals but also strongly identify with teaching. I begin my individual profiles of the teachers in my study with one who exemplifies this quality.
Table 3.1. Conceptions of Self and Others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culturally Relevant</th>
<th>Assimilationist</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher sees herself as an artist, teaching as an art.</td>
<td>Teacher sees herself as a technician, teaching as a technical task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher sees herself as part of the community and teaching as giving something back to the community, encourages students to do the same.</td>
<td>Teacher sees herself as an individual who may or may not be a part of the community; she encourages achievement as a means to escape community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher believes all students can succeed.</td>
<td>Teacher believes failure is inevitable for some.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher helps students make connections between their community, national, and global identities.</td>
<td>Teacher homogenizes students into one &quot;American&quot; identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher sees teaching as “pulling knowledge out”—like “mining.”</td>
<td>Teacher sees teaching as “putting knowledge into”—like “banking.”</td>
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</table>

Pauline Dupree is an African American woman who lives in the more affluent white community that borders the district where my study was carried out. She attends an African American Baptist church that many of the students and parents in the district attend. To some she appears reserved and humorless but during my two years of study, I found her to be serious and sophisticated. She describes herself as a no-nonsense, no-frills teacher.

Dupree is a slender, attractive African American woman. She is always impeccably dressed in a style that reminds one of a corporate executive. Her outfits always are coordinated; she seems to have a different pair of shoes for each. During our first interview she said that the girls in her class sometimes peek around the classroom door in the morning to see what she is wearing. When one of her students asked why she was always "so dressed up," Dupree replied that she dressed the way she did because she was coming to work and she worked with very important people, so she wanted to look good.

Dupree’s classroom reflects her penchant for neatness. As the saying goes, there is a place for everything and everything in its place. Despite the fact that her class is housed in one of the school’s smaller portable classrooms, she has found a way to utilize the space efficiently and avoid a sense of clutter. Stepping from the boisterous playground into her classroom is like stepping into another world. The students are well behaved and orderly—much like Pauline Dupree herself.

During our interview Dupree commented that she was somewhat dismayed at some of the young white teachers who had come to work in the district. “They come in here dressed like people going to scrub somebody’s kitchen. I mean what kind of message do you send the children when you don’t care enough to put on clean, pressed clothes?”

Mrs. Harris, my third-grade teacher, was quite a sharp dresser. She wore beautiful high-heeled shoes. Sometimes she switched to flats in the afternoon if her feet got tired, but every morning began with the click, click, click of her high heels as she greeted us up and down the rows. I wanted to dress the way Mrs. Harris did. I didn’t want to wear old-lady comforters like Mrs. Benn’s and I certainly didn’t want to wear worn-out loafers like those of my first-grade teacher, Miss Schwartz. I wanted to wear beautiful, shiny, high-heeled shoes like Mrs. Harris’s. That was the way a teacher should look, I thought.

Dupree’s thinking about the importance of personal appearance is supported by Foster. In Foster’s memoirs of his years as a high school teacher in New York City, he cites several examples of students’ recollections of teachers who dressed poorly. Foster suggests that in minority communities attention to personal appearance and presentation are extremely important. He describes jailed civil rights protestors who urged their lawyers to change from their blue jeans to conservative suits and to trim their long hair into more conservative haircuts so that they would look more like the prosecutor and the judge. Foster also suggests that the worst dressed teachers are white male secondary-school teachers. He believes that their feelings about the low status of
teachers contribute to poor self-esteem that translates into little or no regard for how they dress.

This is clearly not the case for Pauline Dupree. She cares very much about the way she dresses. This suggests that she also cares about the people she works with and about her profession. Being a teacher is a special calling for her.

Dupree tells her fourth-grade class about teaching as a worthwhile profession.

Dupree: How many of you think you'd like to be teachers when you grow up?
(A few students raise their hands, all of them girls.)

Dupree: What about some of you boys?
(Several students snicker.)

Dupree: Don't you know how important teachers are? Without good teachers, none of the successful people you've read about would have learned the basic things like reading, writing, math, and science that helped them become successful.

Male student: But I want to make a lot of money... be a basketball star!

Dupree: That's a good goal, but most basketball players spend more time in classrooms than they do being basketball stars. They have short careers and they have to be prepared to do something afterward. If you're prepared educationally, you could teach. As far as money is concerned, it is true teachers don't earn as much as I think they should but there really is more to work than earning money.

Another male student: Like what, Mrs. Dupree?

Dupree: Like getting the chance to work with the most important people in the world. Do you know why you're the most important people in the world?

(Silence.)

Dupree: Because you represent the future. How you turn out will have consequences for us all. What you decide to do with your lives can help make this community and the world a better place. I hope a few of you will seriously consider teaching. I'll bet quite a few of you would make excellent teachers.

In the midst of unpacking after one of my numerous moves, I came across my college yearbook. In it, I spotted a photo of one of my professors. On it she had written, “Best wishes to a very capable student who will one day go on to pursue doctoral studies.” My eyes widened in amazement; my mouth dropped open. Why on earth would she have written that? There was nothing about me as an undergraduate that indicated graduate school material. I didn't even know what I wanted to do with my life back then; I'm not sure I even knew what graduate school was or what it required.

Teachers with Culturally Relevant Practices See Themselves as Part of the Community, See Teaching as Giving Back to the Community, and Encourage Their Students to Do the Same

This quality is very evident in Julia Devereaux's work. Devereaux is an African American woman who has lived in the school community most of her life. She attended the very school in which she teaches. She is active in the local Catholic church and she serves as the local troop's Girl Scout leader. She is also the president of the district's teachers' association. None of her own three children attended the public schools in the district. Her two daughters went to a local black liberation school where she had once taught (she had been married to a member of the Black Panthers) and later went on to an exclusive white private school.
Her son currently attends a Catholic grade school that serves a largely African American and Latino population.

Devereaux’s classroom is the portable one next to Dupree’s. Both are fourth-grade teachers but there is a tremendous contrast in the classroom climates. Where Dupree’s class is neat and orderly, Devereaux’s may be described as one of “organized chaos.” It is a busy classroom presided over by a busy teacher. Devereaux constantly looks for materials and supplies to purchase for her students. She takes advantage of special offers and bargains for classroom teachers offered by publishers and teacher supply stores. In consequence her room is filled to the brim with books, posters, novelty pencils, pens, erasers, key chains, coffee cups, and other interesting items. Devereaux is a scavenger who does not mind spending time looking for things that can be used in her classroom.

Along the back wall of the classroom are book shelves overflowing with books—some whole-class sets, others with random, single titles. Devereaux keeps her desk at the rear of the classroom. It has probably been some time since she has seen the top of it because it is covered with books and papers. But the condition of the desk is of little consequence to her because, as its placement in the room suggests, she spends little time there.

This job demands that you be up and active. I don’t have time to sit down at a desk. I need to be able to move in and among the children all day. I’m always saying to the kids, “Put that on my desk . . . put this on my desk.” By the end of the day, so many things have been put on my desk that I can’t even see it. But my teaching is not about paper, it’s about people.

Devereaux believes that teaching offers a humane, ethical way for people to give back to the community. Because she is fluent in French, Devereaux could have opted to teach in a more affluent high school district. She reflects on her choice to remain in the African American community.

I wanted to teach here so much! My first job barely paid the rent. I taught in the private black liberation school where my own kids went too. I just don’t believe that you just take, take, take from the community and never give back. That’s what I try to tell my students today. You’ve got to get a good education because the community needs your brain power.

Throughout the school day, Devereaux reminds her students of ways in which they can become more involved in the community. In addition to talking about building community, she demonstrates how to do it. She offers her home phone number to all of her students’ parents. She establishes a telephone tree so that important information can get to the parents quickly.

One Friday, one of Devereaux’s students did not arrive home. The student’s mother called Devereaux in a panic. Devereaux reassured her that they would find the boy. She activated her telephone tree and the parents organized search parties. The student was found at the home of a friend at about 11:30 that night. Devereaux insists that she could never have done such a thing alone but because the parents worked together as a community the whole group helped in the search.

One of the persistent complaints among today’s teachers is that parents are not involved enough in the schools. Teachers lament the fact that more and more children come from households where both parents work. One statistic suggests that 75 percent of parents never visit their children’s schools. I don’t recall my parents going out of their way to come to school. Perhaps once a year they came for a conference or a student performance, but neither my mother nor my father was very visible. They were too busy working. They expected me to do what the teacher told me to do. However, if my teachers needed my parents for something, all they had to do was call.

Ann Lewis, a sixth-grade teacher, also emphasizes the idea of community. Lewis is a white woman who has lived in the community all her life. Her mother is one of the few white residents who did not participate in the “white flight” of the 1950s; she has
lived in the community for more than forty years. Lewis says that it was the excellent teachers in the district she had as a child that inspired her to become a teacher. Lewis identifies strongly with the African American community; she has speech patterns similar to African American speakers. For a recent television documentary about the community and the school district, Lewis was asked by community members to be a spokesperson. She was the only white teacher that they saw as a legitimate spokesperson for the district.

Lewis and Devereaux were classmates. Now, both in their early forties, the two attended school together as girls. Like Devereaux, Lewis has been active in school district politics and preceded Devereaux as teacher association president. Indeed, she has been president of the local teachers' association at least four times.

Perhaps because of her own active community involvement, Lewis insists that her students form a viable social community before they can become a viable learning community.

They have to care about each other and to depend on one another before we can really get anything meaningful accomplished. We have to have a sense of family, of "teamness." When we see ourselves as a team that works together, we can do anything. Having a kind of team spirit helps them to understand that one person's success is success for them all and that one person's failure is failure for everybody.

One of the ways Lewis builds community in her classroom is through her annual camping trip. Every fall semester she arranges a five-day camping trip for her students near the San Francisco Bay coastline. Organized through the county's environmental education program, Lewis and students camp out with several other groups of students. The goals are to teach about the environment, encourage cross-cultural contact, and in Lewis's case, to build a sense of togetherness and team spirit among her students.

Because many parents in the district have had negative experiences with teachers, Lewis must spend almost a month convincing some that the camping trip is a worthwhile experience and that they should grant their permission. Lewis makes sure that each student is prepared with a sleeping bag and any other necessary equipment.

Many inner-city teachers shy away from this kind of intense interaction with their students. The working hours for them are Monday through Friday, 8:30 to 3:00. Lewis's camping trip represents a sacrifice on her part, but she feels that this experience is a necessary one to mold each group of individual students into a cohesive whole.

"Well, Miss Philadelphia, when are you coming to my house for dinner?" boomed my U.S. history professor. Each of us was invited in turn as part of a group of three or four others to his home for dinner and small talk. Many years later I would be invited—actually required—to attend dinner at my graduate adviser's home. By then I understood that such gatherings served as a way to include people on the "team" and build a sense of community. My undergraduate professor was helping us understand the importance of this kind of behavior. Much of what is expected of you comes in informal learning situations. The jobs that are available, the grants being awarded, the committees most helpful for a person's advancement are issues that are not often discussed in the "neutral" classroom environment. The real business and politics of school often take place among the "community," outside of the classroom.

Teachers with Culturally Relevant Practices See Teaching as an Art and Themselves as Artists

These teachers do not ignore scientific principles of pedagogy. However, they do not view teaching as a technical skill that requires minimal training and they do not believe that as long as one follows a kind of recipe or prescription one can predict outcomes. On the contrary, teachers like Peggy Valentine exemplify the creative aspect of teaching.
Valentine, an African American woman in her midforties, is relatively new to the district, having come from the Midwest after her husband’s company transferred him to the West Coast. She considers herself a strict teacher and she has a flair for the dramatic, waving her arms and rolling her eyes to get a point across. She attended a historically black college and identifies closely with the students because many of them are from single-parent households and her own upbringing was in a single-parent home.

Valentine has taught in both inner-city and suburban schools. Her experiences with teaching more affluent white students has convinced her that African American students have special strengths that are rarely recognized in schools. She is very sensitive to what she perceives as slights made on the basis of race by the school administration. Her principal does not seem to like her personally but he does not hesitate to acknowledge her as one of the best teachers in the school.

Valentine enjoys teaching African American students because she says she identifies so closely with them:

When I look at my children I see myself. I grew up in a single-parent household. I know what it is not to have the things that other children have. I also know that being smart has nothing to do with skin color. I know that some of our kids are what is called “street smart.” They have what black folks call “mother wit”—you know, the kind of sense that keeps you from getting hurt or even killed. When I taught those white kids in the suburbs, of course many seemed to know “book knowledge” but more often than not some of them don’t have sense enough to come in out of the rain.

Valentine creatively engages her fourth-grade students in what could otherwise be a relatively boring lesson about adjectives. To encourage the students to use more descriptive, colorful language in their writing, she has developed an activity to get them to reach for unusual adjectives. This class is held in October and so she benefits from a Halloween atmosphere. She writes a noun on the chalkboard and asks the children to think of as many words as they can to describe it. The first noun is “witch.” Tentatively at first, students begin to offer some modifiers. “Old witch,” says one student. “Mean witch,” says another. “Black witch,” offers a third. All of a sudden, Peggy grasps her chest as if she were having a heart attack and rolls her eyes back in their sockets. “Black witch, old witch, mean witch—give me a break! You guys are killin’ me! I need some great, fantastic, outstanding, stupendous, magnificent adjectives. I’ll even take some compound adjectives. Can anybody save me?” After a few snickers, one boy ventures, “How about a green-faced, hook-nose, evil witch?” “Yes!” shouts Peggy Valentine. “Now you’re cookin’ with gas. Give me more, more!” The lesson proceeds with students shouting out a variety of compound and complex adjective phrases to revive the “dying” Valentine. The lesson goes on for almost forty minutes.

In our after-lesson briefing, Valentine tells me that she had not planned the dramatic part of the lesson. However, until that point she had not felt that the students were really engaged in the lesson. They were just trying to get through it and I know they weren’t getting anything out of it. So I decided then and there to do something dramatic to get their attention. You have to be something of an actor to be a good teacher, and sometimes you have to overact. You’re on stage all of the time. I knew when I went into my “dying” act it would cause some giggles but I also know that my children want to please me. They want to do things right because they want my approval. In order to help them develop some motivation, I capitalize on their strong feelings for me. In my acting role, I could be angry without actually scolding them. I really planned to go about twenty-five to thirty minute on this lesson, but once they got the hang of it and seemed to really
enjoy it, I knew I couldn't cut them off. You just can't put a time limit on good teaching. You have to go with it and see where it comes out. That's why a good teacher's planning is only tentative. You can write all the behavioral objectives you want. When the dynamic of a good class gets rolling, you can't know where you're going to end up. You just have to trust that the learning has been worth it and that the kids have gotten something out of it.

Teachers with Culturally Relevant Practices Believe that All Students Can Succeed

This notion that all students can succeed may seem trite because it is constantly repeated in the pedagogical literature. However, it is not until you see it in action that you know it can be more than a slogan.

In the classrooms of assimilationist teachers—those who seem satisfied with the status quo—there is a belief that failure is inevitable for some students. Thus the teacher develops favorites, or "pets," who are often alienated from their peers. Spindler's discussion of a teacher who operates in this way is very telling about the inability of some white middle-class teachers to recognize the idiosyncratic ways in which they interact with students of different backgrounds.

My fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Powell, seemed out of place in our largely African American school. She was a middle-aged white woman who rarely smiled. I cannot remember her ever touching any of us. I do recall her saying that nobody could get an A in her class because an A would mean that we were as smart as she was. "What a bizarre notion," I thought. I worked hard to earn the A's she did not intend to give. Despite my perfect spelling, reading, and math papers she only gave me B+. My mother went to see her about the discrepancy between the papers I brought home and the grades on my report card. And from the second reporting period until the time I left her room, I received A's from Mrs. Powell. I don't think she thought I was particularly deserving of those A's, but I don't think she wanted to try to explain her unjust grading system to my mother again. Unfortunately, I don't think my mother's ability to persuade Mrs. Powell to rethink her grading extended to my classmates. My mother was able to act as my advocate but she had little impact on the overall system.

Although all of the teachers in this study demonstrated the belief that all of their students could succeed, Gertrude Winston and Elizabeth Harris will be discussed here to illustrate this quality.

Winston is a teaching veteran of forty years. She attended normal school and began teaching in a one-room school in rural Michigan. After twelve years she decided to join the Peace Corps. She had her first contact with black people as a teacher in West Africa. From West Africa she began teaching in urban schools in Southern California and eventually moved to the San Francisco Bay Area for the final years of her teaching career. She describes her experience of teaching African and African American students as transformative. She believes she has received as much from the students as she has been able to give. She is quick to share things the students have taught her about responsibility and kinship relations. She says she has never married because she has been too busy enjoying her life as a teacher.

Walk into Winston's classroom and you walk into a model of order. The room is brightly painted and there are cubicles for each student's work. All kinds of folders have been prepared to help students keep their various papers organized. Because she has her students sit at large tables rather than at desks as most of the teachers do in her school, Winston's room seems larger. Less of the floor space is taken up by individual desks. The personal touches that she has given her room are indicative of the love and care she feels for her students. She presides over a room that shouts "success." Winston insists that she has never met an unsuccessful student.

You know, they're all successful at something. The problem is that school often doesn't deal with the kinds of things that they
can and will be successful at. And those tests! Those are the worst things ever. They don't begin to test what the kids really know. That's why my class is a constant search for ways to be successful. That's why we do so many projects in my class. I figure if we do enough different kinds of things we'll hit on the kinds of things the kids can be successful with. Then I look for ways to link that success with other tasks. For example, when I do my sewing bee, it's linked to my social studies unit but when a number of kids find out they're pretty good at sewing—and I mean boys as well as girls—I can get them interested in reading about sewing and other crafts and then in writing about it. But you know, the tests don't get at this big involved process of moving from a concrete experience to the level of abstraction that writing represents.

Alice Hall became my sixth-grade teacher after our original sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Moses, was promoted to assistant principal. Mr. Moses was a tall white man, one of the few male teachers at our school. While he was our teacher, he seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time chatting with Miss Plunkett, a pretty white teacher across the hall. He sat at his desk a lot. From there he told us what pages to read in our textbooks. Whenever we finished our work we were allowed to draw. I did a lot of drawing while he was our teacher.

I was one of the few students excited about Mrs. Hall's move from fourth to sixth grade. I knew her from flute club and I knew she had many talents and interests. She was a magnificent knitter and she would teach that skill to anyone who was interested. She was a gifted musician and always taught her students to play the fluteophone. One of her strongest subject areas was mathematics and she helped students to delve deeply into its mysteries. Some of the students didn't like Mrs. Hall. Unlike Mr. Moses she required us to work—hard. Many students grumbled but everyone learned. Many years later I saw her at a commencement ceremony at a local college where she was a faculty member. She had become a mathematics professor.

Elizabeth Harris is a "fifty-something" African American woman who has lived in the community for more than twenty years.

She is active in a local Pentecostal congregation and is accorded the respect of a "mother of the church." Students throughout the school are careful about the kind of language they use around her. She is very gentle and soft-spoken. I describe her approach to teaching as reflective and spiritual. Her religious conviction does not permit her to see her students as failures. She sees them all as creatures of God and, accordingly, "God doesn't make junk!"

Harris, Dupree, and Devereaux all teach in the same school. Although it is situated in a white community, the residents were successful in passing an initiative that allows them to send their children to a school in a neighboring white community. Thus African American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students make the short bus ride across the freeway to attend this school. The school's principal is relatively new to the district and is not seen as effective by either her staff or the community. Harris, Dupree, and Devereaux, with their independent spirits, are not among her favorite staff members. They do not deliberately antagonize her, but neither do they kowtow to her wishes, as some of the newer faculty do.

It is not an easy school in which to teach. The school yards, halls, and a number of the classrooms seem particularly noisy. Students talk loudly and sometimes rudely to one another and to the teachers and teachers' aides. Discipline seems to be a preoccupation for many teachers.

Harris, Dupree, and Devereaux have unusual classrooms for this school; all have a sense of order and student engagement. As you walk into Harris's room you are overcome with a feeling of calm and peace. Unlike Dupree's neat and orderly, no-nonsense classroom, or Devereaux's beehive of activity, Harris's classroom seems to be an oasis in a desert or a calm place in the midst of a storm.

Harris starts her second-grade class each morning with a song. One of her children's favorites is "Peace Is Flowing Like a River." She begins instruction by asking "What are we going to be our best at today?" Students start volunteering things, both instructional and noninstructional, at which they intend to excel. "I'm gonna be good at my math," says one little boy. "I'm gonna be
good at lining up for recess,” shouts another. “I’m gonna be good
at doin’ my own work and minding my own business,” says a little
girl. As the students recite their goals and expectations for the day,
Mrs. Harris encourages them with a smile or a comment, “Oh, you
are? Well, that’s very good!” or “I just know you can do that.”

At the end of the day, Harris reconvenes her students to have
them assess how well they met their goals. Each student is given
an opportunity to describe what she or he did to be successful
during the day. Students report on successes and reflect on ways
they could have been even better at some things. Harris con-
stantly tells them how good they are.

I’m not trying to tell the children that they’re something that
they’re not. Even though they don’t all perform on grade level,
we have to have a starting point for success. They need to identify
for themselves what they know they can do and then do it. They
also need to get credit for these accomplishments.

I see a number of our children in church. They demonstrate
that they are capable of all sorts of things there. They sing in the
choir, they usher, they recite, and they make announcements.
I know that if they have the discipline to accomplish these adult
tasks, they can certainly do the things that schools ask of them.

I think that children let too many people, like bad teachers,
convince them that they are incapable of things. They give them
baby work—tons and tons of silly worksheets—and never really
challenge them. They need challenges. They can do it!

Teachers with Culturally Relevant Practices Help Students
Make Connections Between Their Community, National,
and Global Identities

This chapter began with a discussion of the ways in which some
white teachers pretend not to see a child’s color. But for teachers
with culturally relevant practices, students’ diverse cultural back-
grounds are central.

Margaret Rossi is relatively new to the district. She is a former
Catholic nun who has taught in another urban district and at a
white suburban private school. She considers herself a “hard”
teacher, and she cultivates that reputation throughout the school.
She laughs at the fact that the children refer to her, behind her
back, by her surname, as if they were speaking of a drill sergeant.

Rossi says she “hated” teaching at the private school because
she felt the children were “neglected”: they were given material
things but lacked sincere parental involvement. She describes
African American children as the one group of children who
“will be themselves no matter what” and who will tell you exactly
how they feel. “They don’t try to deceive you by pretending that
something is all right when deep down inside they don’t think it
is.” Her assessment of African American children’s frankness is
based on experiences in both African American and white school
communities. Instead of regarding these perceived differences as
deficits, Rossi has called upon them as strengths.

In Rossi’s class, who students are and how they are connected
to wider communities is very important. In the class’s current-
events lesson, Rossi insists that the students be able to make
pertinent connections between the news items they select and
themselves. As the tensions increased in the Middle East prior
to the Gulf War, many students brought in articles that detailed the
impending conflict.

“But what does that have to do with you?” asked Rossi. “We’re
sitting here in sunny California, thousands of miles away from
Kuwait. Why should we care?”

“You can drop a bomb on us!” volunteered one of her
sixth graders.

“No, they can’t,” countered another. “We have all kinds of
radar and stuff, and if they tried to fly over here, we could shoot
them out of the sky.”
"Let's say Rashad is right, and no planes could get through the U.S. radar," said Rossi. "What other reasons can you offer as to why these news issues would be important to us here in this community?"

The students sat silent for what seemed like a long time but was actually only about a minute and a half. This waiting for an answer was characteristic of Rossi's teaching style. She was not uncomfortable with classroom silence, because she believed that when you posed substantive questions with students, you were obligated to give them time to think about an answer. Finally, Denisha, a small African American girl who was a diligent student but rarely spoke up in class, raised her hand.

"Yes, Denisha?"

In a soft and measured voice, Denisha said, "Well, I think it affects us because you have to have people to fight a war, and since they don't have no draft, the people who will volunteer will be the people who don't have any jobs, and a lot of people in our community need work, so they might be the first ones to go."

Before Rossi could comment, an African American boy, Sean, chimed in. "Yeah, my dad said that's what happened in Vietnam—blacks and Mexicans were like the first ones to go."

"I'm not sure if they were the first to go," remarked Rossi, "but I can say that they were overrepresented." She writes these words on the board. "Do you know what I mean by this?"

None of the students volunteers a response, so Rossi proceeds with an example.

"If African Americans are 12 percent of the total U.S. population, and Latinos are 8 percent of the total U.S. population, what percent of the armed services do you think they should be?"

"Twenty percent total," calls out James, beaming at his ability to do the arithmetic quickly. "Twelve percent should be black, and 8 percent should be Mexican."

"Okay," says Rossi. "However, I would call that 8 percent Latino rather than Mexican, because we are also including Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and other U.S. citizens who are from Latin America. But in Vietnam their numbers in the armed services far exceeded their numbers in the general population. Often they were among the first to volunteer to go. Does it seem as if Denisha's comments help us link up with this news item?"

A number of the students verbally concur, while others nod in assent. As the discussion continues, students talk about the impact of having young males in particular leave their community. Given the fact that the numbers of African American and Latino males in this community are decreasing due to incarceration and other institutionalization, the prospect of losing even more men to war does not seem appealing.

By the end of the lesson, students are working in cooperative groups and creating "causality charts" where they list a number of current events and their possible impacts on their community.

In Ann Lewis's class, who students are and how they are connected to wider communities is also very important. One Monday morning, Ann writes on the board "Mandela." She asks if anyone recognizes the name. Most of the students' hands go up. South African leader Nelson Mandela has just been released after decades of political imprisonment. "I know who Mandela is," says Jerry, a sixth-grade African American boy who has strong opinions and an impressive cumulative file of school transgressions.

"Who is he, Jerry?" asks Lewis. "Well, he's this man who was in jail a long, long time in South Africa and he was fightin' for the black people's rights."

"What does Nelson Mandela have to do with us?" asks Ann. Several hands go up. Ann calls on Sugar Ray, a handsome African American boy with a trendy haircut.

"Well, like... Nelson Mandela represents, like, black people everywhere, not just in Africa. You know, just like Martin Luther
King was a symbol for black people not just here but all over the world."

The conversation continues as students talk about how proud they are of Nelson Mandela and how they hope his freedom will mean freedom and equality for black South Africans. Lewis suggests some books and films that students might consult to learn more about apartheid and the struggles of blacks in South Africa. Students talk animatedly about which of these they will choose to read or view. No student expresses an unwillingness to read. Even if they do not follow through with these commitments, it is clear that it is "okay" to read in this class. Reading is not seen as a "sissy" or effeminate activity.9 The students understand both reading and film as ways to get information about things that interest them.

Teachers with Culturally Relevant Practices See Teaching as "Digging Knowledge Out" of Students

One of the commonalities among this diverse group of teachers is an overriding belief that students come to school with knowledge and that that knowledge must be explored and utilized in order for students to become achievers.

Patricia Hilliard is an African American woman in her early fifties who came to teaching after spending several years at home raising her family. After attending the local state university, she began as a long-term substitute teacher in a large urban district. She has taught in African American private schools in urban areas. She describes herself as someone who loves school and learning. Evidence of this claim is the fact that she regularly enrolls in in-service courses and workshops. She has served on statewide curriculum committees and university-funded projects on pedagogy. She sees her role in these activities as ensuring that African American children do not get short-changed when resources are allocated and policy is decided. She came to this school district as a long-term substitute but quickly demonstrated her ability to be effective with the students. The district offered her a teaching contract at the end of her substitute assignment.

Hilliard uses various methods to discover the knowledge that the students bring with them to the classroom. First, she spends time talking with parents about ways that they have educated their children. Then she talks to students about their interests and the things at which they are "experts."

I find that much of what we claim we want to teach kids they already know in some form. I want to know what they know so that we can make some natural and relevant connections to their lives. Sometimes my black children will have information about home remedies or stories and folktales they've heard from their grandparents. We take those stories and remedies and write them up, compare notes, see how their knowledge compares with so-called traditional knowledge. I'm always amazed when students tell me things that I don't know. That happens a lot (the older I get). But it's not just about younger generation versus older generation. My students know about things like community politics and police brutality. I can't feed them a steady diet of cute little animal stories and happy middle-class kids. Their experiences have to be a part of our curriculum, too.

Hilliard's statements reflect her respect for her students' experiences. Rather than treating them as if they do not know anything, their only purpose being to come to school to learn what she wants to teach, she understands teaching as a reciprocal process. By listening and learning from the students, she understands the need to rethink and reenvision the curriculum and what she should do with it.

In sum, a focus on the children's perceptions of self and others is especially important because teachers often express feelings of low self-esteem concerning their own work.10 These feelings are exacerbated when they work with low-income students and
children of color. The pattern for some teachers is to endure a teaching assignment in an inner-city school until they can find a position in a more affluent district with fewer children of color. In contrast, several of the teachers in this study were offered teaching positions in other districts but refused them. Their conceptions of self, students, students' parents, and community are positive. They have made their work in the district their life's work because they love it and are good at it. In the next chapter I will describe how teachers' perceptions of themselves and others affect the ways that they structure their social relations.