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## Bridging the Cultural Divide: A single case study exploring connections between multi-cultural education, identity, self-esteem and leadership

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## **Bridging the Cultural Divide: A single case study exploring connections between multicultural education, identity, self-esteem, and leadership**

### **Introduction**

This qualitative single-case study explores connections between multicultural education, identity development, self-esteem, and leadership. The study focuses on the lived experiences of a lifelong learner, educator, and leader in higher education with the pseudonym Rachel. The interview with Rachel traced how she experiences diversity within her academic experiences as a learner and her professional experiences as an educator and leader.

### **Review of Related Literature**

This literature survey provides a snapshot of multicultural education's historical, cultural, and theoretical context in the public school system. This literature review aims to provide a thorough understanding of the achievement gap, why the achievement gap exists in public education, and practical strategies to integrate critical perspectives into the curriculum that will ensure public schools meet the needs of all learners.

Nieto (1999) provides a thorough survey of the historical context for multicultural education and allows the reader to experience the achievement gap from the student perspective by presenting two representative case studies. Quijada Cerecer, Alvarez Gutiérrez, & Rios (2010) provide a rich history of critical multicultural education and discusses the benefits and barriers that prevent the broad implementation of critical pedagogy. Lee (2014) posits that multicultural education does not adequately address the achievement gap because it treats issues of diversity and inclusion in over-simplified terms. The author argues for antiracist education and describes the varying degrees to which teachers implement it in schools. Finally, Freire (2000)

provided a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the socio-cultural context of racism and the achievement gap within public education. The reading also offers a comparison of the "banking" system of education to a critical pedagogy, which he termed "problem-posing education" (Freire, 2000).

A strong theme throughout the readings is that the current public education system is failing some students – a concept called the achievement gap. Nieto (1999) introduces two students named Ron and Paul, who share how irrelevant and dissonant the curriculum was in traditional school compared to how relevant and engaging the critical pedagogy was at the alternative school. For example, Ron considered school unrealistic and stated that he "never really learned anything" before changing schools. Similarly, Paul described his experience in Chicano studies at the alternative school as "deep" and expressed how he felt a complete sense of his own identity. Paul's words embodied the concept that Freire (2000) referred to as humanization, and in the case study, he reconciles deep contradictions within his cultural identity. Specifically, the traditional curriculum is Euro-centric, and it serves to diminish the cultural background and lived experiences of minority groups. Research shows that "what students bring to class is where learning begins" (Nieto, 1999, p.194). In pedagogical terms, the achievement gap exists because the traditional curriculum provides very little scaffolding on which minority students can build new knowledge.

Critical pedagogy like Freire's (2000) problem-posing education leverages the student's foundational knowledge to provide that scaffolding. In doing so, the curriculum ignites a passion for learning and a more profound love of self. In turn, critical pedagogy fosters critical thinking and decision-making skills. The literature presents four key components of critical multiculturalism: (1) encourages reflexive discourse on conflict; (2) facilitates a critical analysis

of power structures; (3) engages in critical analysis of pedagogical practice; (4) understanding student agency and their lived experience through deep literary and linguistic analysis (Quijada Cerecer et al., 2010, p. 155). Together these components represent a powerful tool to reform current educational practices to meet the needs of all learners. However, there are practical and systemic barriers to reform.

A final theme from the readings is that significant systemic barriers prevent critical pedagogy from being implemented on a transformational scale. These barriers range from ideological to practical. Ideological barriers include racist, deficit-based understandings of culture, "false generosity" in superficial multicultural education, and the political pressure to standardize curriculum and metrics. Practical barriers include too much emphasis on standardized tests and the drain this has on a teacher's capacity to engage in critical pedagogy. According to Freire, the onus is on parents and students to take on the mantle of education reform to enact lasting change (Freire, 2000). Evidence of these barriers was present in the interview with Rachel.

## **Methodology**

The central research question for this study was, 'How do an individual's experiences with diversity as a student influence them as an educator and administrator?' The secondary research question was, 'How does diversity influence decision-making while navigating organizational change for mid-level administrators in higher education?' The study used a purposive sampling strategy to identify a single, representative case. The selected participant is a mid-level higher education administrator, and the researcher used an informal interview protocol to facilitate the interview. This method allowed some flexibility for the interviewer to respond to themes as they emerged during the interview. The approach resulted in a better understanding of how

multicultural education influenced the development of her identity and eventually shaped her experiences navigating the space of higher education administration and leadership during intense organizational change.

The interview was conducted via videoconference using a semi-structured interview format. The interview lasted approximately one hour and forty minutes. The questions focused on the participant's learning experiences and professional experiences with diversity. For this interview, the definition of diversity was intentionally broad to include race, ethnicity, religion, gender, exceptionality, and socio-economic status. The conversation traced her years as a learner and her career experiences as an educator. The researcher transcribed the full interview and coded content to identify relevant themes as they emerged.

### ***Context***

Rachel works as a higher education administrator at a Hispanic-serving institution where she holds the title of Assistant Dean. She is married to her husband of a few years, and they have one son. In the interview, she described herself in the following way,

*I'm 35 years old. My ethnicity is Hispanic. I grew up in a suburb north of [major city in the US]. The populations in the communities I lived in growing up were predominantly white. My home language was English.*

Rachel did not consciously recall confronting diversity issues in her formative years. However, in some ways, Rachel's parents raised her to reject some aspects of her culture to be more successful. She explains:

*My parents when they were raised by their parents [Rachel's grandparents], who believed that they needed to speak English only in order to be successful in their lives, so when my parents became parents, they continued that pattern. Since they weren't raised speaking Spanish, we weren't raised speaking Spanish.*

By rejecting the Spanish language, two generations of her family sought to reflect the hegemonic culture by speaking English in their home instead of Spanish. Rachel also described how she learned about her culture while cooking with her grandmothers during family gatherings and from her friends in high school.

In high school, Rachel began to embrace her cultural identity in new ways when she and her friends formed the Hispanic Pride Club. This ethnic awakening opened doors for awakening in other aspects of Rachel's identity (Freire, 2000). For example, Rachel is a practicing Catholic, and in her early twenties, she experienced a spiritual awakening:

*I've always identified as Catholic, and I would go to Mass and not really understand why Catholics kneel, stand, and make the sign of the cross. It was just routine to me. My interest and new knowledge of theology is the reason why my faith life strengthened.*

Rachel's religious identity continues to evolve and shape her experience as an educator and higher education administrator. More discussion on the intersectionality of Rachel's diverse identities is presented in subsequent sections of this paper.

## **Findings**

After transcribing the interview, three central themes emerged from our conversation: inclusivity, self-confidence, and leadership. In Rachel's own words, she describes an early memory of feeling marginalized:

*In third grade, I had trouble with math. I hope my ethnicity didn't play a part in the deficient-style teaching approach of my teacher. Remember, I am the minority at my school, probably less than 15% Hispanic. Immediately without exploring or assisting me with challenges I faced with math, my teacher immediately recommended to my parents that I get tested for special education.*

In learning environments where Rachel experienced marginalization, her sense of self-confidence plummeted, and she experienced increased academic challenges. Reflecting on this

third-grade experience, she says,

*I think that eventually it had to be something I overcame on my own. I really think math became a mental block for me. I really wish my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher tried another approach with me instead of giving up on me so fast. I was already not a confident student and having to go to the back of the room and recite math facts when I already had anxiety was extremely nerve racking as a third grader. I felt like it was all based on this one exercise and if I could not master it then she would send me off to “another classroom.”*

Eventually, Rachel’s family moved so she could attend a more competitive and nationally recognized public high school. The new neighborhood was even less ethnically diverse.

However, through her social network Rachel and her friends were able to organize a Hispanic Pride Club that functioned as a supportive community of learners,

*When I began high school, the Hispanic student population was less than the middle school I attended. I remember my junior year some of my friends and I thought about starting a Hispanic Pride Club.” [Probe] “maybe unconsciously they thought it’s ok to be Hispanic and we need more diversity. So, we got all the approvals [to start the club].*

This school's academic rigor and support network prepared Rachel to transition to community college successfully, even though the transition was challenging. Rachel described a counseling session that left her questioning the counselor’s advice and her motivation for steering her toward community college instead of more competitive four-year programs:

*I don’t know if it had anything to do with my ethnicity or not but my high school counselors first suggestion for my higher education options were “community college”. Most of my friends were scheduled to take their SAT and ACT exams because they needed certain test scores for admission to universities like, University of Texas, Texas A&M, Purdue, and even out-of-state schools. And I’m thinking why did my counselor not encourage me to apply to several universities and to aim for higher scores on my SAT and ACT exams? So, I thought, once again there goes my confidence level.*

While it is not immediately apparent in how Rachel portrays this interaction if this represents a deficit approach to diversity, it is evident that Rachel felt disempowered after the exchange.

Rachel did attend a residential community college at a Hispanic-serving institution. This

experience represented an asset-based approach to diversity. In her own words, Rachel describes the power of learning in an environment that takes an asset-based approach to diversity:

*My experience at a community college was a crucial part of my higher educational background. I attended a Hispanic Serving Institution (H.S.I.), I had never attended a school where the Hispanic student population was the majority. Besides the academic component of the community college, it also gave me the opportunity to learn more about my culture.*

In this environment, Rachel experienced less marginality, and her role as a student was more centralized. Her self-confidence soared and she excelled academically. In the quote below, she explains many of the ways she was involved in student life as a college student:

*I was involved in extracurricular activities at the community college, which was a great way for me to get involved and network with others. I served as the dorm newspaper editor, member of the Spanish Club, and I was selected to serve as a Student Ambassador. As a Student Ambassador, I would speak with high school students in surrounding areas about higher education which included my personal experience and the admissions process. It's at this time, I began really get interested in the field of higher education as a possible career for me.*

In this more inclusive learning environment, Rachel experienced higher levels of self-confidence and secured leadership positions. Eventually, Rachel would complete a master's degree and pursue a doctorate in education.

After serving in various positions in higher education and non-profit agencies for over six years in 2010, Rachel's career path brought her full circle. In 2010, Rachel's alma mater hired her to work for a federal grant program. After three years in a counseling position, the college appointed Rachel as the Dual Enrollment (DE) Director. Finally, after four years of successful leadership and exceeding every goal the administrative team gave her, she was promoted to a mid-level position as Assistant Dean. In her own words, Rachel attributes her career advancement in part to leadership changes in the administration:



*At the time I applied for my first administrative role as Dual Enrollment Director, the college has recently hired a new college president. The new college president is history because she is first woman and first Hispanic to become president of this institution. She seemed more open to hiring women for administrative roles, which wasn't the norm.*

The new president represented underrepresented groups, and Rachel perceived that she was more inclined to hire candidates for leadership roles that also reflected diversity.

When the administration hired Rachel as the Dual Enrollment Director, she became responsible for the administrative oversight and restructuring of the program. She led a team to the successful expansion of services to over 40 independent school district partnerships in nineteen counties. The last semester she was in this role, the program the dual enrollment program made up for over 54% of the entire college enrollment. The quote below offers a window into the way Rachel perceived herself negotiating her own diversity in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity as a higher education administrator working with superintendents from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds:

*At the time I served in this position, I was a young Hispanic female, and most of the meetings I attended were with ISD Superintendents and their administrative team (majority white males), and they were not expecting to see me at the table, but over time we learned to respect each other and created partnerships that would benefit hundreds of students jumpstart their college careers. [PROBE]I heard comments when I first began this position like, "REALLY, you are the director" My predecessor was an older (over 60 years old) white woman and she had been in that role for a while so this led to comments such as "you are new [predecessor name]? Or "You are replacing [predecessor name]?"*

In this quote, Rachel demonstrates a strong sense of self-awareness and confidence as she negotiates diversity as a mid-level administrator in higher education.

## **Discussion**

The literature on critical multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy and

teaching provide a deeper understanding of the connections between self-confidence, inclusivity, and leadership, as reflected in Rachel's story. This section includes a brief definition of critical multicultural education theory and culturally relevant pedagogy theory and a discussion of how these theories provide a deeper understanding of Rachel's lived experiences.

Critical Multicultural Education (CME) affirms students' cultural background and challenges hegemonic culture. According to Nieto (1999), this theoretical approach challenges deficit explanations for student failure and calls out systemic failures for specific groups of students. Rachel's special education referral in the third grade exemplifies a deficit approach to diversity. More specifically, educators misunderstood the incongruence between Rachel's home culture and school culture and mistook it as a disability (Gay, 2010). Similarly, Nieto (1999) speaks to how irrelevant and dissonant the curriculum is in traditional schools compared to those with more relevant and engaging critical pedagogy. In Rachel's case, had the third-grade teacher taken a critical perspective and engaged with her in a meaningful way, she would have realized that the incongruence between Rachel's ethnicity and the traditional curriculum was the source of cognitive dissonance and not exceptionality.

Nieto (1999) also describes how CME problematizes a simplistic focus on self-esteem, a theme identified in Rachel's story. Traditionally, researchers have minimized and dismissed the cognitive dissonance we observed in Rachel's case as poor self-confidence. Here Rachel describes how the experience affected her self-confidence in a profoundly personal way:

*I honestly felt that my third-grade teacher gave up on me. I remember nervously walking to the back of the room for my "math drill" session and the teacher telling me "Hurry up." My stomach would be in knots, and I almost wanted to cry. I sat down in the cold plastic metal chair and saw her frustrated look as she said "okay, now recite your facts." Her look would scare me and by the time I could calm down and think straight my time was up. I would not earn a "yellow*

*star sticker” for my star on the wall. Seeing my friends with more stickers than me, only made me feel worse.*

Traditional approaches to diversity provide a limited understanding of self-confidence. A CME interpretation of this interaction acknowledges the apparent bias of the teacher toward hegemonic culture and knowledge. In comparison, a critical approach would have engaged Rachel in a more dialogic approach where there was greater interaction between student and teacher (Gorski, 2013).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) informs this discussion because to engage with culturally responsive teaching, deeper connections between the home culture and school culture must be present in the learning environment (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Rachel described her first experience when she was able to make connections between her home culture and the school culture in the following quote:

*When I attended high school and met students that were also Hispanic, we immediately formed a special bond. Most of them knew more Spanish than me and more about our culture so I enjoyed learning from them. As a member of the Hispanic Pride Club, we were invited to perform at a state dancing competition. We learned a Salsa dance and had a blast performing in front of an audience. When I mention my Hispanic friends, they were from all over like Colombia and Argentina.*

Culturally relevant teachers are intentional in their effort to create social interactions that help students achieve academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness through these strategies: engaging in reciprocal relationships between teacher and students; facilitating meaningful connections between students and teacher; developing a community of learners; encouraging students to co-create knowledge and be responsible to each other (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.480). As Rachel shared her story, she identified many mentors who encouraged her and assisted her career advancement. These teachers and mentors played pivotal roles in Rachel’s decision to pursue graduate education.

## **Implications**

Rachel's experience as a student and educator makes a strong case for a more socially just pedagogy. The pathway to a socially just pedagogy begins with meaningful connection and reciprocal relationships between learners and educators. One practical strategy that educators can use to develop these connections is to incorporate creativity and fine arts into the curriculum. Creative assignments allow space for cultural and artistic expression and are open to interpretation. These assignments can stimulate critical thought, deepen communication, and build a foundation for a community of learning. Educators should be intentional about building learning communities where students are accountable to each other and to the knowledge that is being created. The educator's role is to facilitate the students' critical approach to knowledge construction and consumption. Banks (1993) explains, "Students should be given the opportunities to investigate and determine how cultural assumptions, frames of references, perspectives, and the biases within a discipline influence the ways the knowledge is constructed" (p. 11).

## **Personal Reflection**

I have grown both professionally as an educator and as a researcher from participating in this inquiry. The content of this interview widened my understanding of how I personally experience and negotiate issues of diversity both as a learner and as an educator. I experienced an awakening to how I experience and negotiate diversity daily. This raised consciousness has opened the door for me to think critically about my own privilege and the privilege of others. With this new knowledge I can be an advocate for myself and others experiencing injustice.

I have grown professionally as an educator and researcher because of this inquiry. The experience of interviewing Rachel and reflecting on her lived experience helped me to make connections to current education research. This deepened my understanding of how I experience and negotiate diversity issues as a learner and educator. This raised consciousness has opened the door for me to think critically about my privilege and the privilege of others. With this new knowledge, I can be an advocate for myself and others experiencing injustice.

The inquiry also deepened my knowledge of how diversity impacts learning environments. I am much more aware of the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds. I understand that diversity shapes how learners consume the formal and informal curriculum. I also have a greater appreciation for the ways that students can co-create knowledge amongst themselves and function as educators themselves.

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