

“She Looks Like English-Only”:

A Caucasian Teacher’s Experience as “The Other” in a Mexican-American Classroom

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Abstract

A Caucasian teacher occupies a unique position within a classroom composed entirely of Mexican-American students. The issue of ethnicity, while often not overtly apparent, has implications that extend to all aspects of the classroom environment. This research draws upon examples from a classroom in which Latino students seemed reluctant to bring elements of Mexican culture, including Spanish language, into the classroom setting. This paper explores the effects that the presence of a member of the dominant culture may have on students' willingness to share elements of their subordinate culture within the classroom.

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In order to gain a broader perspective on public education, I decided to do my student teaching in Chicago. I student taught in the fourth grade classroom at José Clemente Orozco Academy of Fine Arts and Sciences, located in the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood of Pilsen. Orozco Academy is a first through eighth grade school that is divided into two separate blocks: the primary and the middle school. The primary block within Orozco is a magnet school for gifted bilingual students. In order to be admitted to the school, students have to apply and score within the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile on the state’s standardized achievement test.

Because of the gifted label, the primary block places strict and challenging requirements on teachers and students. An emphasis on high academic achievement creates particularly demanding expectations. Teachers expect students to have higher levels of self-sufficiency, responsibility, and dedication to their studies than their peers who attend other schools. Consequently, the elementary students enrolled in the primary block of Orozco Academy are generally well-behaved, hard-working, and high-achieving.

Being bilingual also contributes to these students’ giftedness. Every student in the primary block is Hispanic and speaks both English and Spanish. Similarly, all of the teachers in the primary grades are both Hispanic and bilingual. This lack of racial and cultural diversity among students and teachers within the primary block was perhaps the most

prominent element of my student teaching experience. Prior to student teaching in Chicago, I had always been a member of the cultural and ethnic majority. In sharp contrast to my prior experiences, at Orozco Academy I was the only Caucasian person in the entire elementary school. It was often easy to ignore this fact during the minute-by-minute interactions I had with students and teachers. However, my lack of attention to racial and cultural differences in the small moments of each day did not make those differences disappear. In fact, issues of race and culture were very much a part of my daily life as a student teacher.

Upon reflection on being the outsider in a community in which one culture was shared by students and teachers, I thought more deeply about the significance of my own culture and how it affected my role as the outsider and as the teacher in this particular situation. Not only was I different, but I also belonged to the dominant culture – the one which, in many ways, the teachers at Orozco attempted to emulate and the students strove to adopt. I began to wonder what influence I had as a white, middle-class, English-speaking teacher on my classroom of Hispanic students. This wondering led me to question: What are the effects of the entry of “the other” into a monocultural classroom?

#### Literature Review

In researching this question, the literature I encountered focused on four main topics: the effect of Caucasian teachers on minority students’ achievement, the role of teachers’

attitudes towards minority students, the role of language in the classroom, and finally the role of the dominant culture within the classroom.

The teacher occupying the role of “the other” in a classroom is not a recent occurrence. In fact, teachers have been charged with teaching children of cultures to which they do not belong for quite some time. Recently, it has been typical for teachers who belong to the dominant culture (white) to teach minority students. A variety of research has been conducted on the effects of white teachers on minority students’ achievement. In contrast to a 1977 study by Sheehan and Marcus cited in “The Relationship Between Chicano Children’s Achievement and Their Teachers’ Ethnicity” by Andrea Vierra (1984) that “found no significant interaction between teacher race and student race in a sample of black and white first graders,” more recent studies show that teacher ethnicity does affect student achievement (p. 285). One such study completed by Thomas S. Dee (2004) and described in “The Race Connection: Are Teachers More Effective with Students Who Share Their Ethnicity?” claims that, “Among black children, the results indicate that having a black teacher for a year was associated with a statistically significant... increase in math scores” (p. 57). This study confirms Dee’s (2004) assertion that “racial dynamics within classrooms may contribute to the persistent racial gap in student performance” because many minority students are taught by Caucasian teachers (p. 53). It is important to note here that these studies were conducted in regards to African-American students and Caucasian teachers. This research does not shed any light on the effect of white teachers on Latino students.

However, due to the similarity in achievement gaps between African-American and white students as compared to Hispanic and white students, it can be assumed that the results of the study can be broadly transferred to Latino students. Regardless of the specific minority race, Dee (2004) states, “the most important caveat is that this study tells us little about why the racial match between students and teachers seems to matter” (p. 59). Thus, one question yet to be resolved is what exactly makes white teachers less effective with minority populations?

The attitudes of teachers toward their minority students are widely discussed in the literature as an element that may contribute to the effect of white teachers on minority students’ educational experiences. Teachers’ attitudes towards language seem to have a particularly strong influence on their Latino/ELL students. In her article “Bicultural Identity and Language Attitudes: Perspectives of Four Latina Teachers” Evelyn Marino Weisman (2001) comments on teacher attitudes saying, “bicultural teachers who maintain a strong connection with their primary culture are more likely to value the native language of their Latino students” (p. 210). It is clear that teachers who share the same culture as their students often have a more positive attitude towards their students’ culture and bilingualism. However, Reyes (1992) acknowledges that, “Even in bilingual classrooms, it is not uncommon for teachers to convey a higher status to English than to the native language of the students” (as cited in Weisman, 2001, p. 204). Both bicultural and monocultural teachers often stress the importance of English over students’ native languages, and

American culture over students’ native cultures. This attitude of cultural and linguistic superiority can be attributed, in the case of teachers who belong to a different culture than their students, to the difference in cultural identity. Tomás Galguera (1998) states in his article titled “Students’ Attitudes Towards Teachers’ Ethnicity, Bilinguality, and Gender,” “Group membership and identity influence attitudes towards others” (p. 413). If a teacher belongs to the dominant culture, it becomes easy for him/her to adopt an attitude of superiority regarding both culture and language. This attitude which, if adopted, lessens the value of the students’ primary culture and language, certainly contributes to white teachers’ effect on minority students in the classroom. Much attention is paid in the literature to the negative attitudes of white teachers toward cultures and languages that do not belong to the dominant culture, yet little attention is given to the effect of white teachers’ positive attitudes towards the cultures and languages of their students. In their article entitled “‘We Call Him Dr. King’: Reciprocal Distancing in Urban Classrooms,” Joanne Larson and Patricia D. Irving (1999) offer a statement to describe the effects of teachers’ positive attitudes: “We will argue that when teachers understand and value students’ linguistic and literacy practices, social differences can be negotiated and perhaps bridged” (p. 396). Thus, the authors assert that a positive attitude towards students’ native languages will prevent teachers from alienating their students’ culture. It is important to note the use of ambiguous language, however. By using the word “perhaps,” Larson & Irvine are suggesting the possibility that positive attitudes towards languages may not be enough to welcome

students’ languages and cultures into a classroom setting. The question remains, are there other factors at work besides teachers’ attitudes that influence the prevalence of the dominant culture in the classroom? Further exploration of the effects of positive teacher attitudes on the achievement and overall educational experience of minority students would give a much more complete picture of how teachers’ attitudes influence their minority students.

Most of the literature regarding teachers’ attitudes was focused around their perceptions of students’ native languages. This is due to the fact that “language [is] symbolic of and instrumental to ethnicity” (Galguera, 1998, p. 414). For many who are learning English, “language... is a means by which humans learn to create meaning within the context of their culture. ...[Therefore,] language becomes intimately connected to a sense of cultural identity” (Weisman, 2001, p. 208). When students are not permitted or encouraged to express themselves in their primary language, they are also discouraged from expressing their true identity and culture. Often in schools, students’ native languages are replaced with English which carries with it a greater value because it is an element of the dominant culture. Weisman (2001) asserts, “In American society, for example, not only does English have a greater prestige, but other languages are commonly viewed as inferior” (p. 204). Because language and culture are inseparable, discouraging or banning the use of languages other than English in schools places the cultures associated with those languages in a position of inferiority. This power dynamic is often exhibited in the classroom, especially

one in which students are learning English. According to Weisman (2001), “The prevailing view that their language and culture is inherently inferior to that of the dominant group often leads Spanish speakers to internalize this ideology and to distance themselves from their cultural heritage in an effort to become accepted by the mainstream” (p. 210). Thus, as students give up their native language, they also often give up their native culture, all to achieve a higher degree of acceptance into the dominant culture. Because students learn to give up their native languages for English in schools, the educational system is responsible for the assimilation of many non-native English speakers into the dominant culture.

Schools have the unique capability of introducing and inducting students into the dominant culture of the society by creating “successful” students. Lisa Delpit (2006) asserts in her book *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* that “success in institutions – schools, workplaces, and so on – is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those who are in power” (p. 25). Furthermore, there is a “continuous struggle among Latinos and other subordinate groups to survive in a society that exerts extreme pressures to assimilate to the standards of the dominant group and to discard the values of their primary culture” (Weisman, 2001, p. 208). Minorities are certainly at odds with the dominant culture in a society that expects them to assimilate in order to succeed; schools seem to be the perfect environment for members of subordinate cultures to assimilate. Maria Eugenia Matute-Bianchi (1980) confirms this notion in her article titled “What Is Bicultural About Bilingual-Bicultural Education?” saying, “We are shaped by our total environment, and schooling

contributes in ways that are congruent with our society’s social, economic, and political structure” (p. 91). Matute-Bianchi (1980) further states, “A ‘de-Mexicanized’ student has more chance of achieving equality of educational opportunity” (p. 107). Clearly, there is a great deal of societal pressure that encourages members of subordinate cultures to adopt the dominant culture, thereby placing less value on their own culture. To shed light on the process of assuming a place within the dominant culture, Weisman (2001) offers examples of “factors that may contribute to the extent to which individuals identify with the dominant or primary cultural group. These include the availability of cultural mediators, level of proficiency in the language of each group, and the individual’s similarity in physical appearance to the dominant group” (p. 205). Each of these factors has a specific place in schools, but the role of the teacher is particularly significant. As members of the educational system that encourages its participants to assume the dominant culture within its boundaries, teachers have an important role in encouraging the adoption of the dominant culture. Some teachers do so outwardly by devaluing students’ native languages, and some teachers do so implicitly by simply belonging to that dominant culture. Teachers who belong to the dominant culture become the “cultural mediators” that provide the opportunity for minority students to enter into that dominant culture. Therefore, through nothing else but their race, white teachers extend an invitation to their subordinate culture students to emulate the dominant culture.

Through an examination of literature in search of elaborations upon the effects of “the other” on a monocultural classroom, I found both explanations and areas in which more explanation is needed. The literature I encountered provided a solid explanation of the teacher’s role in acculturating his/her students into their role in the dominant culture. Likewise, the literature provided a firm explanation for the role of (English) language acquisition in the process of acculturation of minority students. There are, however, two aspects that the literature discussed with little elucidation: why exactly Caucasian teachers are less effective when teaching minority students and how teachers’ positive attitudes towards the language and culture of their minority students affect students’ desire to assimilate into the dominant culture. My experience did not provide me with much concrete evidence regarding the effects of Caucasian teachers on the achievement of minority students. Therefore, I will focus on offering insights provided by classroom experiences into the effects of teachers’ positive attitudes towards the culture and language of their students.

### Research Findings

It is appropriate for me to acknowledge my bias before I examine my own experiences in my classroom of bilingual and bicultural students. Being a Spanish-language speaker and learner, I viewed occasions to communicate with my students and other teachers in Spanish as exciting learning opportunities. Furthermore, being inquisitive about Hispanic culture made me attuned to its presence (or lack thereof) within classroom

interactions. Finally and perhaps most significantly, I had the single-sided perspective of a monocultural participant in a bicultural classroom. My self-identification as “the other” necessarily contributed to my perceptions of classroom interactions. My position as a bilingual, monocultural, white teacher, while contributing to my bias as a researcher, also provided me with a unique perspective from which to view the matters discussed in the literature alive and at work in my classroom.

Before detailing any of my observations of students and their interactions with language and the dominant culture, I will further explain my role in the classroom. Upon hearing that I spoke Spanish, one surprised third grader aptly exclaimed, “She looks like English-only!” This comment seems simple, but I believe that it embodies the majority of my experience as “the other” at Orozco Academy. In an effort to counter the assumption that I spoke only English, I read to my students in Spanish on the first day of school. Beyond that, I made Spanish a daily part of the classroom in the morning message I wrote on the chalkboard. During instructional time, I pointed out as many instances as I could think of in which the Spanish language was helpful to students in acquiring English vocabulary. For someone who “looks English-only,” I used quite a bit of Spanish in the classroom. My use of Spanish was multipurpose: first, it gave me a chance to become more proficient at speaking Spanish. More importantly, it portrayed my positive attitude towards Spanish to my students. I believe that bilingualism is a tool that should be used as much as possible, and my use of Spanish communicated that belief to my students.

Although my treatment of culture was not as outwardly obvious in the classroom, I made similar efforts to portray my positive attitude towards Hispanic culture. I participated in Hispanic culture as much as possible within the school, which included learning the words to the Mexican National Anthem which I sang along with my students every Friday morning. I also invited both formal and informal discussion about celebrations and other cultural happenings. Lastly, I maintained an inquisitive nature amongst my students and the other teachers in the building, always trying to learn more about the cultural backgrounds of the people surrounding me. Unlike the teachers stereotyped in the literature, my attitude towards Hispanic culture and the Spanish language was exceedingly positive.

My students’ use of language fascinated me throughout the three months I spent observing and teaching in their classroom. Regardless of my attitude towards or treatment of my students’ primary language, they generally used language as a means of reflecting the dominant culture. For the purposes of analysis, I will limit my discussion of observations to interactions that occurred in the science classroom. It is important to note that the science teacher was Mexican and had herself immigrated to the United States when she was fifteen years old. As a function of learning English relatively late in life, she had a prominent Mexican accent when she spoke English; her language mirrored that of many of the students. While she taught primarily in English, she frequently used Spanish in her lessons to monitor and clarify students’ understanding. Although most students responded to her in English, there were a handful of instances in which students utilized their Spanish as a tool for more

effective communication. For example, one day the class was discussing the body’s systems. Presumably because he did not possess the vocabulary to express himself in English, one student commented, “Un sistema del cuerpo es cuando los órganos trabajan juntos.”<sup>1</sup> Exemplified by this interaction, this science class taught by a Mexican teacher was an environment in which students used their linguistic strengths to support their cognitive growth.

As I began teaching the science class, I noticed an acute difference in the languages used in the classroom. The more I taught, the more monolingual the classroom became. Sharply contrasted with the Spanish language interactions students had with their Mexican teacher, in a three week period only one student on one occasion used one Spanish word while I taught. We were discussing the use of grafting in botany and I asked the students if any of them had heard of skin grafting. One student responded, “Is that when they [hesitation] coser<sup>2</sup> you?” Why was this the only Spanish word uttered in the classroom setting while I was teaching science? Admittedly, my own use of Spanish in the science classroom was lacking primarily due to the fact that I lack content area vocabulary in science. However, how much can that fact, which I never advertised to my students, affect their strict use of English in an area in which their content vocabulary knowledge may be low? What factors characterized by my presence as their teacher caused them to change their language pattern within the classroom?

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<sup>1</sup> Translated: A body system is when the organs work together.

<sup>2</sup> Coser = to sew

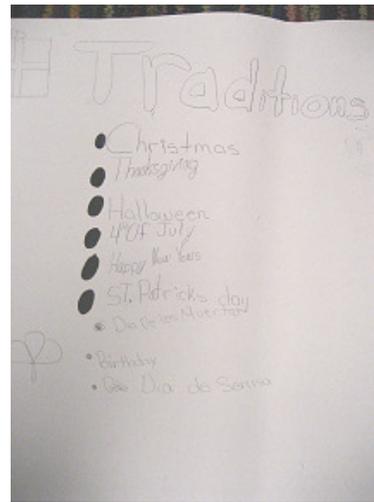
This is an instance in which Larson and Irvine’s (1999) notion of social differences being bridged by positive attitudes towards language does not hold true. Despite my continual attempt to portray my positive attitudes towards Spanish, my bilingual students relied much more heavily upon their English while I taught their class. This observation leads me to believe that, for these students, there was more involved than just my attitude towards their primary language. I believe that my students’ dominant use of English while I was teaching was a function of their membership of the subordinate culture in society. As young Hispanic people, they have learned to communicate with members of the dominant culture in English. As explained by the observant third grader, skin color and language are inseparable; therefore the comment “She looks like English-only” makes sense. My students’ English-only interactions with me in their classroom are a clear representation of their response to me as a member of the dominant, English-speaking culture.

The use of language was only one way in which students responded to my presence as a member of the dominant culture in the classroom. My students and I were acutely aware of our cultural and ethnic differences in one instance in particular. As a part of Hispanic Heritage Month, my cooperating teacher taught a lesson on Hispanic identity. She offered the class a (false) definition of Hispanic: someone who speaks Spanish and lives in the United States. The students and I had similar reactions upon hearing this definition. We exchanged surprised glances that, in their subtext, exclaimed, “Does that mean that Ms. Rachel is Hispanic?” Suddenly, a chorus of young voices broke out proclaiming, “Ms. Rachel, you’re

one of us!” Of course, this assertion intrigued me. Did my students really consider me one of them? If so, why? The day after being so warmly accepted as Hispanic, I asked my students to elaborate on this notion in their journals. I presented them with the prompt, “What makes me one of you?” Upon discussion of this question, some students asked me, “Ms. Rachel, what if we don’t think you’re one of us?” I responded, “Great! Tell me why you think that!” As I read the journal entries that addressed this topic, I encountered many surface-level responses. Students claimed that I was one of them because I spoke Spanish like they did, or that I was not one of them because I was not from Mexico. Reading these surface-level responses made it clear to me that both my students and I understood that I was not and never would be Mexican-American like them. Through this discussion of ethnicity, it became clear that my students wanted to accept me into their culture. On some levels they did; I was openly accepted into the classroom culture and that of the school as well. As a member of that school culture composed entirely of Mexican-Americans, I received a limited position in the Hispanic culture present within the school. It was not enough, however, to deconstruct larger societal norms. Even though my students continued to insist, “You’re one of us, Ms. Rachel,” their hesitance to bring elements of their Mexican culture into the classroom demonstrated my permanent role as “the other” in the classroom.

My student teaching responsibilities offered me the opportunity to continue with this mini-unit on Hispanic culture as a part of Hispanic Heritage Month. Rather than pretend that I was an expert on Hispanic culture, I invited my Mexican-American students to be the

experts and teach me “how to be Mexican.” As a class, the students generated a list of the elements that make up culture. Following that discussion, small groups of students elaborated on those cultural elements by making illustrations or providing examples on poster paper. Students then presented their posters to the class. They were allowed and encouraged to use Spanish on their posters and in their presentations. As the students presented their posters (entirely in English), I found two particularly interesting. Even though the assignment was to outline important elements of Hispanic culture, the groups that illustrated traditions and celebrations included more elements of American culture than Hispanic culture.



The traditions and celebrations such as Thanksgiving, Groundhog’s Day, Valentine’s Day, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and St. Patrick’s Day represented on these two posters reflect strictly American culture. Other holidays such as Christmas and, to some extent, Halloween (Día de los Muertos in Hispanic culture) are shared by both cultures. The only truly Mexican element of culture represented on either poster was El Grito. At the conclusion of these

poster presentations, the students in the audience asked their peers why they chose to exclude certain Mexican traditions and celebrations from their posters. Neither presenting group was able to articulate the choice. Only after I asked the entire class to think of purely Mexican celebrations and traditions were the students able to add Día de Ceniza, Día del Niño, Quinceañera, and Cinco de Mayo (written in English as the 5<sup>th</sup> of May) to their posters. This activity led me to question why, when explicitly asked to discuss Hispanic culture, did students choose to present elements of American culture? How did my presence as the only monocultural American in the classroom affect the students’ responses?

As with issues of language in the classroom, my presence as a cultural mediator cannot be overlooked. Because I am a member of the dominant culture, bicultural students are more apt to represent that dominant culture in my presence. One speculation I have made in regards to why students failed to share information on their subordinate culture is that students feel most comfortable when they can discuss shared experiences. My students’ reluctance to offer Mexican traditions and celebrations in their presentations may have been due to their knowledge that I have not experienced many of those celebrations and traditions. Rather than feel uncomfortable while trying to explain (in English) the significance of celebrations like El Grito in Mexican culture, students selected holidays that they knew I had experienced and therefore they would not have to explain. The implications of this level of discomfort surrounding sharing their subordinate culture with a member of the dominant culture of society are great in the classroom setting. If students are not comfortable sharing

elements of Mexican culture when explicitly asked to do so in the classroom, it is extremely likely that they do not feel comfortable sharing their experiences as related to their subordinate culture when not explicitly asked. There is a wealth of background knowledge and experience that surely goes overlooked because students do not share such cultural information with their teachers who belong to the dominant culture. The implications of this cultural barrier within the classrooms of minority students taught by dominant-culture teachers are monumental.

### Conclusion

The literature that addresses the effects of majority-culture teachers on their subordinate-culture students emphasizes the importance of teacher attitudes towards students’ languages and cultures. While it holds true that a teacher’s attitude has a noteworthy importance in the classroom, based on my experience as “the other” amongst 31 Mexican-American students, I concluded that a positive attitude alone cannot reverse the societal structures and norms presented by ethnicity and culture. Even though I encouraged my students to share their Mexican culture with me and they knew that I spoke Spanish, looking “like English-only” and belonging solely to the dominant culture had an insurmountable affect on the environment and interactions within the classroom. Because minority groups are continuously expected to cater to the dominant culture, it becomes very difficult for such societal norms to be traversed in the classroom as it is a microcosm of

society. Given the difficulty of breaking down societal norms within the classroom, and especially one in which the teacher represents the cultural and ethnic majority to which students are accustomed to conforming, how can a Caucasian teacher make it acceptable for her students to represent and utilize their subordinate culture within the classroom? This question has no definitive answer, nor should it, as each classroom is different. I did not spend enough time in the classroom to see the full effects of my approach towards answering this question. Regardless, I will offer some suggestions for the treatment of ethnic and cultural barriers in the classroom.

Similar to the suggestions presented by the literature on this topic, I believe that keeping an open attitude towards culture and language is the most fundamental component of a classroom that breaks down the societal norms associated with ethnicity and culture. One way that students will trust that their teacher values their culture is if she is inquisitive about it. Simply stating, “I value your culture” is not enough; students respond better to genuine interest and curiosity about their culture.

In order for students to incorporate their culture into the classroom, they need to be presented with safe opportunities to share their culture within the classroom environment. The teacher’s inquisitive nature can be an invitation to cultural sharing, but the overall classroom environment must support such sharing as well. Other students must respect their peers’ desire to open up such a fundamental and personal part of their lives for others.

In a supportive environment, though, students should feel free and excited to share their personal, familial, and cultural histories with their peers and teacher.

Finally, in order to handle the issue of a lack of experiences that are shared between the teacher and her students, it is imperative that the teacher create experiences within the boundaries of the classroom that students can use to inform their learning. Over time and as students begin to share their own cultural experiences and background knowledge, those experiences will serve as excellent supplements to the classroom-based experiences. Because experiences are integral to learning, the teacher should strive to provide whatever common experiences may be lacking in the classroom.

While I have not thoroughly tested these suggestions, I firmly believe that they are the basis for a successful classroom in which the teacher’s culture reflects the dominant culture in society rather than her students’ culture. I am confident that had I spent more than three months with my Mexican-American students, they would have felt more comfortable with allowing their Mexican side to show in the classroom. No classroom will ever be entirely free of societal norms that govern the interactions between cultures, especially when one is dominant and the other is subordinate. However, with the appropriate combination of valuing and encouraging cultural sharing amongst all members of a classroom, students and teachers alike will benefit from a chance to learn something about the life of “the other.”

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