

# Transforming Teacher Cultural Landscapes by Reflecting on Multicultural Literature

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*Children cannot be expected to develop a sensitivity toward others merely because they are told so. Attitudes are difficult to change ... Literature allows individuals to share in the lives of others; it can also provide an avenue for multicultural understanding.* (Wham, Barnhart, & Cook, 1996, p. 2)

A major goal of most teacher education programs is the development of teachers who are sensitive supporters of all students, embrace diversity, and plan and implement inclusive and culturally responsive instruction. Student populations, even within teacher education programs, are not always endowed with the desired attitudes and wisdom that allow them to embrace such diversity; thus they need guidance from the teacher education faculty.

It is also clear, with growing numbers of K-12 students from varying countries and cultures, that the ethnicity and cultural backgrounds of the teacher population is not in itself representative of the diversity in our schools (Banks, 2006). It is with great interest that educators, parents, and politicians seek ways to transform the status quo in education, leading to greater academic achievement, more proactive attitudes of acceptance, social justice, and equitable opportunities for all students.

In this article, we explore concepts of transformation and share the results of an attitude-changing experience of a group of teacher candidates. Concepts relevant to transformative learning include functions of self-inspection, facing dilemmas that produce lasting impressions (Mezirow, 2000), recognizing voids and holes in

personal attitudes and understandings, often called landscapes (Greene, 1994), and reflecting on behaviors and practices.

The teacher candidates described here were engaged primarily with multicultural literature—this involved readings, discussion, and reflection. After reading assigned picture books, young adult novels, and then dramatic, often highly charged adult literature from countries and cultures not previously known by the readers, these teacher candidates shared their reflections and their insights about the changes that they experienced. Analyses of these experiences and reflections are the basis for the conclusions in this article.

## Transformative Learning Theory

How does change occur? How can teacher educators provide experiences to guide future teachers toward cultural responsiveness and inclusivity? An initial step in transformation, leading to changes in one's cultural landscape, is to become critically aware of how and why personal perspectives sometimes constrain the way we perceive, interpret, and feel about our world realities.

Transformative learning theory, rooted in adult learning theory, describes ways that learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experiences (Cranton & Knox, 2006). Mezirow (1991) suggests that transformative learning develops out of a cognitive disequilibrium. He notes changes that follow experiences with disorienting dilemmas and critical reflection.

Therefore, Mezirow defines learning as "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (1995, p. 49). Mezirow (1991) also notes that transformative learning occurs when individuals change their frames of reference by critically reflecting on assumptions

and beliefs, and consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds.

Wilson, Switzer, Parrish, and the IDEAL Research Lab (2006) note that the transformative learning experience includes these elements:

- ◆ *Lasting impression.* The learner holds in memory details about the learning experience.
- ◆ *Part of the person's self-narrative.* The learner references the learning experience within a narrative about himself/herself or in relation to a subject matter of importance to the learner.
- ◆ *Behavioral impact.* The learner can point to specific changes in his/her life as a result of the learning experience.

Teacher educators may structure experiences that provide disorienting or shocking revelations to their students and that will direct them toward critical reflection leading to lasting impressions and, more importantly, changes in practice.

Future teachers need to expand their sociocultural consciousness and try to develop knowledge and dispositions in order to better understand the context in which they are teaching (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Nieto, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Exposure to unfamiliar issues within cultures through children's and adult literature and reflection on personal beliefs coupled with the addition of new perspectives should provide teacher candidates a more accurate picture of cultural characteristics and contributions (Gay, 2002).

## Understanding Personal Landscapes through Self-Reflection

Greene (1994) uses the term "landscape" to describe one's personal understandings, including biases, preferences,

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and what she calls “vacancies” in the landscape. Vacancies are experiences to which one has never been exposed or even contemplated and likely create holes of misunderstandings. She asserts

...certainly, if we are to become attuned to those places, become aware of those places where our selves and selves of others are to be intertwined, we must be open to our horizons, to the patterns, yes, the vacancies in the landscapes against which our stories are told. ... I want to suggest that teachers break out of the confinements of monologism, open themselves to pluralism, become aware of more possible ways of being and of attending to the world. (Greene, 1994, p. 21)

Cassidy (2001) notes that reflecting on our experiences allows us to process information at a deeper level. She continues,

We learn through experience, and that experience can be articulated quite naturally in narrative form. Narrative helps us give meaning to experiences which will assist in creating a context for information to be stored in the brain. (p. 22)

From her work in experiential learning, Cassidy explains the value of debriefing and how students can subsequently assimilate and use information following the sorting and organizing of the experience. She recommends exploring meanings of narratives, not only in the academic areas, but as the experiences have impacted life stories. She continues by noting the value of narratives as transformative learning tools.

### Multicultural Literature and Transformative Learning

Although varying perspectives are expressed on the definition of authentic multicultural literature (Loh, 2006), our stance aligns with Short and Fox (2003) who look at this literature as reflective of the “values, facts, and attitudes” of the culture. It is without question that different readers will respond differently to this literature as they do to all literature. However, authentic diverse literature should provide a window through which the reader senses the deep structure of the culture. This literature must also support and respect differences in historical perspectives (Thompkins, 2003) thus aligning with a multidimensional definition of diversity (Banks, 1996; Sleeter & Grant, 1999).

Another criterion for authentic multicultural literature is that while the narrative examines themes, concerns, and ideas from the viewpoint of the cultural group it

also clearly reflects the authentic cultural voice. Both criteria support role identification and perspective taking which can contribute to the teacher candidates building a personal and emotional connection with the literature and with the culture.

Even though cultural attitudes emerge at an early age, when teacher candidates are exposed to disorienting ideas found in authentic narratives, the result may be critical reflection and confrontation of their beliefs and cultural assumptions. Examining their own landscapes through a different cultural lens may yield other perspectives and consequently transform beliefs and practices.

In this article, we make a case that the use of literature that reflects other cultural beliefs and habits, as well as their everyday functions, may generate transformation in teacher candidates’ attitudes and approaches toward teaching and working with an increasing culturally diverse student population (Leftwich, 2002). Upon reading multicultural literature, teacher candidates may come to understand not only their sociocultural identities but in addition they will recognize the tight connections among school, society, and culture and their teaching practices may be impacted.

### Multicultural Literature Project in Teacher Education

A multicultural literature project was designed for use in two different courses related to second language acquisition, culture, and family and school relationships in an undergraduate teacher education program, in Southwest Florida. Out of the 45 participating teacher candidates, aged 21 to 30 years, there were six males and 39 females majoring in early childhood, elementary, secondary, and special education. With the exception of two African Americans, one Haitian-American, and four Hispanic teacher candidates, all identified themselves as Caucasian.

The unique feature of this project was the inclusion of multicultural literature at three different levels, with books targeting young children, teenagers, and adults. Addressing the differences in cognitive accomplishments, maturation, and “*funds of knowledge*,” i.e., background knowledge (Moll & Gonzales, 2004) of the original audience, these books explore concepts about cultural identity and values in diverse breadth and depth.

The readings were compiled to represent the most common minority cultures

and ethnic groups in the Southwest Florida region where these teacher candidates will most likely teach. Thus, our readings focused on the following cultures: Mexican, Cuban, Korean, African American, Muslim/Iraqi, Puerto Rican, Haitian, and Guatemalan ethnic origin. A list of the books used in this project appears in the Appendix.

The teacher candidates selected a culture, preferably one with which they were unfamiliar, and completed a concept map to represent their current knowledge about that specific culture (Correa, Hudson, & Hayes, 2004). In the map, they wrote or visually represented all features of the culture including concepts and values familiar to them at that time. When they identified an area, such as language, about which they had no knowledge, the student wrote a question mark next to the area’s name. This pretest was used as baseline data in terms of teacher candidates’ conceptualization of the culture.

During the following six to seven weeks teacher candidates read the three books while keeping a double-entry journal to record sections of the books that generated critical reflection in their thinking about families, schools, and communities in the given culture. After having read all three books, teacher candidates were requested to develop a reflection paper using a list of “questions for thoughts” to track the changes in their thinking about the culture.

With these questions, teacher candidates were encouraged to explore the extent and the depth that their cultural landscape was transformed through literature. After the completion of all these tasks, teacher candidates developed a concept map as a posttest with the same parameters as the pretest. A subsequent class discussion followed for them to reflect orally on the changes in their understanding and dispositions towards the targeted culture.

To understand the impact of this multicultural literature project, an analysis of teacher candidates’ work was created. In preparing that analysis, the teacher candidates were each assigned an identifying number. To link the comments to each student, the comments were given the initials of the culture being explored, thus creating an identifying code (see Table 1 for the coding of cultures). For example, individual comments presented in the next section will be identified through codes such as 1MA, 2CA, 3KA, etc.

All pretest concept maps, double entry journals, final reflection papers, and

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posttest concept maps were reviewed and analyzed for emerging themes, for the extent of teacher candidates' perception and understanding about culture, and for the changes that the reading and reflection on multicultural books generated in their cultural landscape.

### Teacher Candidates' Journey toward Cultural Transformation

The pre and post concept maps were used to document the changes in teacher candidates' conceptualization of culture. Two researchers independently tallied the items on the concept maps to determine whether the items represent surface or deep cultural values and whether there was a change in the conceptualization of culture. The objective, or what may be called surface, components of culture include the visible and tangible features such as food, clothing, rituals, institutions, and laws; the subjective, or deep, components of culture consist of less visible aspects such as values, beliefs, and hierarchy of social roles (Triandis, 1972). Any questions were also noted under these two categories.

The results of the pretests suggested that teacher candidates' focus on the objective and subjective components of culture was relatively equal. A deeper examination clearly revealed the teacher candidates' limited knowledge of selected cultures as well as some misconceptions and overgeneralizations.

Conversely, the posttest concept maps showed a decrease in the focus on objective components of culture and a considerable increase in items related to subjective components of culture. No questions were noted from the posttest concept maps. The reading of three books followed by self-reflection seemed to have refocused teacher candidates' perception of culture as

they concentrated more on the subjective components rather than the objective components of culture.

The further analysis of the teacher candidates' double entry journals, reflection papers, and classroom discussions resulted in the following four themes that are indicative of the teacher candidates' emerging transformation.

**Theme 1: Emerging awareness of a new culture with evidence toward a lasting impression.** Teacher candidates critically reflected on the newly gained information about the selected culture (Jennings & Potter Smith, 2002). They discussed the elements of deep culture, focusing on such topics as family/cultural values about education, respect for the elderly, work ethic, pride in cultural identity, and teaching and learning that take place in families and communities. It was noted that rather than the tourist approach to cultures and diversity, which would reflect only a surface understanding, they were instead becoming increasingly aware of the in-depth elements of culture that are more likely to impact learning, communication, and instruction in their future classrooms.

For example, teacher candidates noted the interconnectedness of family values and education, and said:

*It really opened my eyes to their family structure. This showed me that the family cares about each other and works hard to support one another. (1MA)*

*Families in the Cuban culture are very dedicated to their hard work habits and expect the same from their children even if that means taking time away from the child's schooling. (1CA)*

Furthermore, teacher educators seemed to have developed a better understanding about experiences of children from diverse cultures. They often noted:

*I have realized that there are many children who have left homeland and feel trapped between two cultures. (2PR)*

Finally students' personal narrative explored their critical self-reflection as writing about a misconception that was cleared after reading these books:

*I was willing to only think of Muslims as terrorist who are strict and stuck in barbaric times. I went into this assignment thinking that I was only going to be reinforced in my thoughts. Now that I am reflecting about what I have learned—boy was I wrong! I am happy I was wrong and*

*now when I see a female Muslim wearing a Hijab I know that they are representing their religion and not part of a terrorist group or willing to be male dominated. (1MI)*

**Theme 2: Shaping personal awareness of his/her own culture.** Reading multicultural books also generated teacher candidates' critical reflections on their own culture which resulted in a multifaceted awareness. Students recognized similarities among cultures even if they pronounced them to be different, and one of them noted:

*Reading these books has also helped me realize many of the values each of our cultures can attest to are similar as well, such as the importance of family and doing things as a family. All of these similarities that we have with other cultures should make us realize that we are all very similar when it comes to things we value as a culture. (4MA)*

On the other hand, these books also called for the variations within a culture, as another teacher candidate stated:

*When students enter my classroom from a similar culture as mine I cannot just assume they have had the same upbringing as myself... The roots of a culture may be the same but that does not mean the lives that stem from the roots will all be the same, everyone is unique and that is an important thing to remember for me as a future teacher. (5AA)*

Finally, the books offered a new understanding about cultures which seemed to be relatively unfamiliar to students, as a teacher candidate reflected:

*By reading these books I am able to make some connections from their culture to my own, I know that they do not live a completely different life and that there are more similarities than I ever expected. (1MI)*

**Theme 3: Recognizing the need for further learning.** This experience with multicultural books engendered an intention for further learning. The personal narratives described how by reading these books new windows for looking closely at a culture were opened. Teacher candidates realized the unlimited spaces for further exploration. Two responses were:

*These books in particular have really opened my eyes to just how different other cultures can be from my own and from each other. It has become quite apparent to me that as culturally aware as I thought I might have been, there is quite a bit I am unaware of. While I do feel as though I learned about other cultures from these books, I feel I am walking away most with*

Table 1  
Coding of Cultures  
Represented in Analysis

MA	Mexican American
CA	Cuban American
KA	Korean American
AA	African American
MI	Muslim/Iraqi
PR	Puerto Rican
HA	Haitian
GU	Guatamalan

a greater appreciation of how much there is to learn. (1AA)

I believe that these books have taught me about the Haitian culture and language, yet, there is definitely more I would like to know to help me be a better educator. (5HA)

#### Theme 4: Emerging proactive planning for culturally responsive instruction.

Teacher candidates seemed to internalize the information from the books at various levels, linking it to their future profession. The following quotes demonstrate how strong action plans regarding cultures and languages can be present in American classrooms:

I will also be sensitive if the family or child speaks in Ebonics. I do not want them to stop their natural language, but I will explain that in class we need to talk the way we write. (3AA)

Another teacher candidate considered future emotional well-being and noted:

I also must keep in mind that children are broken away from family members such as grandparents. Families who come over from Cuba may leave loved ones behind, which may leave emotional scars on children. (1CA)

One candidate further narrated a specific strategy and said:

As a teacher, it is important to acknowledge and respect students' ancestral and cultural background by not Americanizing students' names. By using and correctly pronouncing students' names that are given to them by their parents, the teacher is providing a bridge between the students' home and school life so students do not have the dilemma of asking "Which one was me." Thus, the students do not have to disown their cultural past as they acclimate to life in a new country. (2HA)

These pedagogical actions seemed to indicate a significant shift of interest and disposition toward working with culturally diverse students (Wilson, Switzer, Parrish, & IDEAL Research Lab, 2006).

#### Conclusions

How do we know when teacher candidates are opening their minds and attitudes to cross-cultural understandings? How can we determine clear indicators of cultural transformations? The analysis in this project indicated that when teacher candidates have opportunities to experience multicultural literature, to reflect on it, and to discuss the narratives, transfor-

mative thinking clearly emerges in their discourse.

In this project, there was strong evidence of a gain in new culturally specific information. The students' responses provided affirmation of sociocultural consciousness, especially in the significant growth in the teacher candidates' ability to redefine schemas of understanding related to cultural insights and focus on deep universal cultural values. In addition, proposed changes in instruction including specific pedagogical actions and plans for working with diverse students were confirmed.

In conclusion, the impact of this activity resulted in multifaceted cultural awareness, including a refocus on deeper cultural elements and values and a self realization of the importance of cultural self reflection. These actions underscored a significant shift of exhibited dispositions towards working with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

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### Appendix Books Used in the Project

Culture	Children's Book	Young Adult Book	Adult Book
<b>Mexican-American</b>	<i>Amelia's Road</i> Author: L. Altman Illustrator: E. Sanchez 1993. New York: Lee & Low Books	<i>The Circuit</i> Author: F. Jimenez 1997 New York: Houghton Mifflin	<i>Caramelo</i> Author: S. Cisneros 2002 New York: Vintage
<b>Cuban-American</b>	<i>Cuban Kids</i> Author: G. Ancona 2000 Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish	<i>Where the Flame Trees Bloom</i> Author: A. Flor Ada Illustrator: A. Martorell 1994 New York: Simon & Schuster	<i>Dreaming in Cuba</i> Author: C. Garcia 1992 New York: Random House
<b>Korean-American</b>	<i>Dear Juno</i> Author: S. Pak Illustrator: S. Hartung 1999 New York: Puffin	<i>When My Name Was Keoko</i> Author: L. Park 2002 New York: Clarion	<i>A Step from Heaven</i> Author: A. Na 2001 New York: Penguin
<b>African-American</b>	<i>The Other Side</i> Author: J. Woodson Illustrator: E. Lewis 2005 New York: Penguin	<i>The House You Pass on the Way</i> Author: J. Woodson 1997 New York: Penguin	<i>The Color of Water</i> Author: J. McBride 1996 New York: Penguin
<b>Muslim (Iraqi)</b>	<i>The Librarian of Basra</i> Author: J. Winters 2005 Orlando, FL: Harcourt	<i>Magid Fasts for Ramadan</i> Author: M. Matthews 1996 New York: Houghton Mifflin	<i>Thura's Diary, My Life in Wartime Iraq</i> Author: T. al-Windawi 2004 New York: Penguin
<b>Puerto Rican</b>	<i>A Golden Flower: A Taino Myth from Puerto Rico</i> Author: N. Jaffe & E. Sanchez 1996 New York: Simon & Shuster	<i>An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio</i> Author: J. Coffey 1996 New York: Penguin	<i>Almost a Woman</i> Author: E. Santiago 1998 New York: Random House
<b>Haitian</b>	<i>Josiah, Hold the Book</i> Author: J. Elvgren Illustrator: N. Tagdell 2006 Honesdale, PA: Boyd Mills Press	<i>The Scorpion's Claw</i> Author: M. Chancy 2004 Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree Press	<i>Tonight by Sea</i> Author: F. Temple & T. O'Brien 1996 New York: Orchard
<b>Guatemalan</b>	<i>Sawdust Carpets</i> Author: A. Carling 2005 Berkeley, CA: Group West	<i>Tree Girl</i> Author: B. Mikaelson 2004 New York: HarperCollins	<i>Hummingbird House</i> Author: P. Henley 1999 Denver, CO: MacMurray & Beck