

Exploring Students' Cultures

The Impact of Teachers Exploring Students' Cultures

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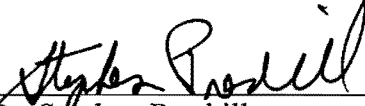
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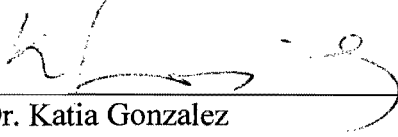
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Abstract

Cultural gaps and assumptions exist all over the United States. When teachers are unaware of their students' diverse needs and traditions, a special connection between the student and teacher is not developed. Student-teacher connections within the classroom are essential for learning. The purpose of this qualitative study is to show how teachers can explore students' cultures and how such exploration impacts student behavior and learning in the classroom. Participants included four American female teachers from a Public School in Brooklyn, New York who met for ten weeks to research and better understand the Urdu culture. They explored the Urdu culture in novels, autobiographies, and parent interviews. Findings indicated that the more the participants explored the culture and implemented new changes in the classroom accordingly, the better the Urdu students reacted, creating a student-teacher connection. Among the culture in the kindergarten classrooms, many Urdu children who were once shy or behaved unacceptably, transformed into children eager to participate in learning.

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Chapter 1: Teacher-Student Relationships

Forming Connections

A sizable literature provides evidence that strong and supportive relationships between teachers and students are fundamental to the healthy development of all students in schools. In other words, as children enter formal school settings, either in preschool or kindergarten, relationships with teachers provide the foundation for successful adaptation to the social and academic learning environment (Hamre & Pianta, 2004). Children rely on teachers to provide them with the understanding and support that will allow them to get the most out of their daily interactions within the classroom. Positive relationships with teachers can also serve as a secure base for children. Teachers also rely on students to gain feedback on what they are learning and what they may need help with. It is safe to say that teachers as well as students both benefit when it comes to establishing a connection in the classroom.

There is ample research for teacher-student connections and their effects on classroom interactions and learning. A longitudinal study by Hughes, Yu-Wu, Kwok, Villareal, and Johnson (2011) provides evidence that a teacher's report of a supportive, connecting relationship with a student has positive effects on elementary students' behavioral and academic adjustment.

According to research, how closely teachers and their students interact and connect makes a difference (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Children feel more comfortable and open up more once a connection or bond with an adult is established. Children spend a significant amount of time with their teacher daily for about ten months. Just as teachers bring features of themselves into the classroom, so students begin to make impressions

that are important for the formation of the relationship that develops over the course of the school year. With a positive connection on both ends, the learning process can be inviting and create a better atmosphere within the classroom (Crosnoe, Johnson & Elder, 2004).

Among many complex factors that hinder teacher-student connections include gender and age. Across grades kindergarten through eighth, girls tend to form closer and less conflictual relationships with their teachers than do boys (Wentzel, 1998). This means that boys are at greater risk of relational difficulties in the early years of school. The need for positive relationships between teachers and their students does not diminish as the children gets older. Support in teacher-student bonds are just as important at transition points, such as transitions from elementary to middle school (Hughes, Cavell & Jackson, 1999). For example, middle school teachers who convey emotional warmth and acceptance as well as make themselves available for communication and interaction help foster the students' interests in academic and social pursuits.

Teacher-student connections are needed in high school years as well. Although students have less time with teachers during high school, there is strong evidence that relationships with adults in these settings are among the most important predictors of success. Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health indicate that high school students reporting greater connectedness to teachers display lower rates of emotional distress, suicidal ideation, suicidal behavior, violence, and substance abuse (Roeser & Galloway, 2002).

Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs may also affect the nature of the teacher-student relationship. According to Zeller and Pianta (2004), teachers who believe that they have

an influence on students tend to interact in ways that enhance student investment and achievement. In other words, when teachers hold high, but confident expectations for their students, students tend to achieve more, experience a greater sense of self-esteem, and achieve competence as learners.

Teachers' mental health may also play an important role in relational experiences. Many studies have examined the importance of teacher-student relationships for the development of children. According to the studies in Birch and Ladd's (1998) research, teachers who report depressive symptoms were less sensitive and more likely to engage in negative interactions with young students. Teachers experiencing depressed states are more likely to respond in a dependent fashion to students' needs and have difficulty establishing emotional and or behavioral boundaries for students. Also, as the teacher-student interaction in high school decreases, becoming more formal, less personal, and more evaluative, the relationship between student and teacher may also decrease if there is a negative self-efficacy on the teacher's part. As a result, these changes can lead to more negative self-evaluations and attitudes toward learning among students because the impersonal and evaluative nature of the relational context does not match with the students' needs. Students tend to develop lower intrinsic motivation as well (Birch & Ladd, 1998).

Personal relationships with children afford teachers internal rewards and give meaning to their work. Spilt, Koomen & Thijs (2011) shows that teachers have a basic need for relatedness with students in the class and internalize experiences with students in representational models of relationships that guide emotional responses in daily interactions, increasing teacher's sense of well-being. Insight into teacher well-being adds

to the understanding of teaching careers. Such well-being includes stress and burn-outs. Stress is defined as a negative emotional experience that is triggered by a person's perception of an external situation that poses as a threat to self-esteem. Moreover, more than major life events events, the re-occurrence of daily hassles and prolonged experience of negativity facilitates burn-out. Knowing what factors are supportive for teachers could be helpful in creating and expanding school contexts that foster teachers' job commitments. It is clear that the formation of personal, supportive teacher-student relationships inherently demands emotional involvement from teachers. For students, there is evidence that teacher-student relationship is an important factor in their school engagement, well-being, and academic success (Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011).

Cultural Awareness

The globalized world of today finds a combination of different cultures, all brought into one common place, creating what is commonly called "diversity." The Census Bureau projects that by the year 2100 the U.S. minority population will become the majority, with non-Hispanic whites making up only 40% of the U.S. population (Hodkinson, 2005). There is no doubt that teachers and students will need to learn how to interact in a diverse environment.

It is often said that more than cognitive and academic development flourish when children participate in learning-rich environments at schools. All domains of development can be facilitated in school contexts. Teachers, school administrators, and children's peers are all important influences in the lives of children both inside and outside of the classroom. Pica-Smith (2009) states that schools are "sites of identity," meaning that these are the places where children learn about themselves, others, and their

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surroundings. They are spaces in which children grow cognitively, academically, socially, and morally. Because of the abundance of different cultures in public schools today, children have the opportunity to learn, play, and cooperatively engage with children of different backgrounds. Students who attend schools with a diverse population can also develop an understanding of the perspectives of children from different backgrounds and learn to function in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic environment. Yet, as public schools become more diverse, demands increase to find the most effective ways to help all students succeed academically as well as learn to get along with each other. Teachers are faced with the challenge of making instruction "culturally responsive" for all students while not favoring one group over another. A 2007 study by Public Agenda and the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality found that 76% of new teachers say they were trained to teach an ethnically diverse student body, but fewer than 4 in 10 say their training helps them deal with the challenges they face (Hodkinson, 2005).

By grounding instruction solidly around students' lives, teachers can make attempts to understand their culturally diverse students. Getting to know the student's families, lives, and background are important factors for successful culturally diverse classrooms as well as avoiding racial or cultural bias during planning instruction (Aboud & Levy, 2000). Teachers should stock the classroom with multi-cultural materials, like literature, photos, media, games, and traditions to support the cultural norms of the children and create a welcoming environment. Often, however, teachers and students have difficulty connecting with each other within the classroom because of cultural gaps and assumptions that exist. Teachers should always check their own attitudes and beliefs

about immigrant families, dual language learners and people of color by reflecting on their own assumptions and by learning to become involved with diverse people around them. In order to open the door for a successful classroom, teachers must believe in the ability and values of each child within the classroom even when their own culture and values are different. By preparing curriculum and activities that show students the importance of their culture, the dignity of their worth, and the power of kindness and humor, teachers can serve students better and lead them in the direction of learning in a successful multi-cultural classroom.

When cultural and linguistic differences are added to the complexity of a classroom, the role of collaboration with the family and active participation becomes pertinent. Such collaboration with the family gives parents a welcoming feeling to participate, have their voices heard, and to contribute information about their child in order to help teachers enhance their child's educational process. When welcomed, families gain a sense of trust with schools and school personnel in order to avoid issues of language barriers, intimidation, and conceptions of undervalue (Cochran-Smith, 2005).

The number of individuals in the West who describe themselves as Muslim/Islamic is growing at a higher rate than non-Muslim Western citizens, and Muslims are now the second largest religious group in many Western countries, including Canada, Britain, and the United States (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). Teachers may abide by official policy curricula, but they view textbooks through their personal and professional knowledge and make pedagogical decisions based on those views. In fact, many public schools in the West are marginalizing Muslim students through their education and practices, whether by failing to include Muslim's historical and contemporary

contributions as well as perspectives into the school's curricula or having low expectations for Muslim students and lacking knowledge about Islam and Muslims (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). It is important for teachers to be flexible in a way that every culturally diverse student's needs are met and their background is incorporated within the classroom community.

In conclusion, it is important for teachers to make connections with their students. This study seeks to explore how novice teachers facing a range of pressures can form a better relationship with students whose culture they don't understand.

Chapter 2: How Teachers Learn

Action Research

There is vast research on how teachers learn through action research projects. According to Postholm (2011), action research is when people in an organization are aware of and utilize what is already known and generate learning out of this knowledge and their existing experiences by rethinking yesterday's experiences in the light of today's and tomorrow's. In other words, teachers can utilize knowledge they already have in their teaching community to look ahead and develop their practice. Action research is about reflecting and rethinking. It has spirals of change consisting of planning, action, and decision-making. Action research can help teachers to look ahead and not to get stuck in their own experiences; it helps them reflect and rethink in order to learn.

Learning never stops. Teachers constantly learn new things daily just like students do. Their learning may not be tied to curriculum content so much as to little things that can make a classroom easier to understand and manage. Students, for instance, can keep teachers updated with the newest trends. They can also teach new vocabulary, mostly slang, especially phrases popular in social media. Teachers can gain a new sense of patience when students help teachers realize their own limits. Teachers may also learn that each student is unique in the sense that every student is not the same nor do they learn or interpret things similarly. This realization can support differentiation, where teachers differentiate instruction or change the way something is being taught in order for learners of every kind (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or hands-on students) to understand the same content. Teachers need to understand subject matter deeply and flexibly so that they can help students create useful cognitive schemas, relate ideas to experiences, and

address misconceptions. Teachers need to learn how ideas connect across fields and to everyday life. Most importantly, teachers learn from watching their children learn (Huan, Quek, Ang, Yeo, & Chong, 2012).

Picower, (2011) created a qualitative, multi-year study on the questions of how teachers can be such learners. He traced how teachers learned and how they developed thinking skills around cultural understanding needed to build bonds across cultures. The study used audio-tapes, bimonthly meetings, individual interviews, and observations focusing mainly on K-5 classrooms. The study also examined how relationships between first-and second-year teacher participants developed.

Picower cited the 2004 Alliance for Quality Education study that beginning teachers are more likely to leave the profession than seasoned ones: fourteen percent of new teachers leave after the first year, thirty-three percent leave within three years, and almost fifty percent leave in five years. These teachers enter the profession to make a difference and contribute to positive change in society. The constraints that they face in public schools, however, make it difficult for them to realize their ideals. In order to combat their disappointments, the article suggests that teachers need projects that will help them gain skills, improve their pedagogy, and take action that can result in a sense of empowerment. As a new teacher myself, I found this article to offer powerful advice. Picower went on to argue that professional development must provide teachers opportunities to share what they know, discuss what they want to learn, and connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique concepts. Quality mentoring by veteran teachers and access to networks of educators who share similar concerns were other key

strategies that often promoted successful learning. All of these approaches contribute to success of action research projects.

Teachers often couple concepts of social justice with action research. There is rich tradition of teachers who approach education from Dewey's (1932) social justice perspective:

For many, a commitment to social justice also involved a critique of current inequities in society and experimentation with ways to create socially just conditions within schools that model the equality of educational access and equity of educational outcomes we want for a larger society. (p. 427).

Like Dewey (1932), social justice educators do not see teaching is a neutral enterprise. They understand that education is political and reflects the cultural, racial, economic, and political tensions of the time. In attempt to learn about such educational innovation in contemporary everyday settings, Picower (2011) designed the Social Justice Inquiry Political Project as an environment in which to gather phenomenological data to uncover how participants supported the development of new social justice educators.

Participants were chosen and categorized by their race, teaching grade, type of school, and by how many years they had taught. Participation resulted in members becoming reflective of their journey and remaining committed to teaching and social justice. They learned to "have each other's backs" and felt a sense of pride in their accomplishments. The style of collaboration the teachers engaged in supported their development in three main areas: understanding what it looked like to be socially just educators, concrete plans that increased their ability to actualize social justice education in their classrooms, and leadership skills.

By acting as models, members provided each other with inspiration and motivation. Evidence showed that more experienced teachers gave a sense of what was coming next and helped newer members get started and sparked new ideas for everyone. Most importantly, listening to each other's experiences helped them all to better analyze their own concepts. A second year teacher in Picower's (2011) research shared her experience and strategies:

Hearing from other people and seeing their progress lets me have a catalog of what can happen, and later on if something like that comes up, I have a reference for how to deal with it. I do realize it's going to be hard, so just knowing that makes me feel better and it gives me lots of ideas. (p.19).

Often, the only thing new teachers hear is how hard and overwhelming the first year is. Hearing success stories can have a positive effect on new teachers because it shows that everyone once struggled, but with help and encouragement, teachers of all ages can teach and learn.

Also, the project helped the mentors develop. Participants who were mentors learned to lead a group which provided leadership practice for other settings and were given positive feedback about their styles. By providing practice in facilitating and presenting, members felt more confident in themselves, their skills, and their ability to be leaders in the field. Rather than feeling like quitting when social justice issues were especially difficult, the participants now had the ability to step up and take charge, a required skill that they have now retained.

The experiences of these teachers reflect on the conclusion of other researchers: involving learning through the students (Keat, Strickland & Marinak 2009). Despite the

barrier to understanding students, learning can happen even if it is the teachers who are the ones doing the learning.

Teacher Learning with Immigrant Children

The number of families with young children moving from one nation to another is increasing. Early childhood teachers welcome more children and families from diverse cultures into the classroom communities. According to Keat, Strickland, and Marchinak (2009), in many nations, early childhood educators report personal awareness that the presence of immigrant children in their classrooms presents both professional opportunities and challenges as they design relationships, environments, curriculum, assessment, and curriculum for all children. In the United States, teachers report that the opportunities are related to appreciation for the chance to expand all their children's awareness of diverse languages, family traditions, and culture. At the same time, however, teachers report challenges related to apprehension that they might not have accumulated enough knowledge of various languages, family traditions, and cultural assumptions to sensitively serve the needs of each child and family.

In order to try and overcome apprehensions in the classroom, Keat, Strickland, and Marinak (2009), conducted a study in which teachers were encouraged to not only turn to their colleagues for help and knowledge, but also to their children. It took place in a private preschool in an upper-class neighborhood in Central Pennsylvania that was experiencing an unprecedented increase in diversity. The purpose of this study was to allow immigrant children in a pre-school setting to use a disposable camera to communicate with their teachers. Each child was given a camera, instruction in taking photos, and was requested to take pictures of what was important to them. The data were

collected by recording each child telling the teacher about the pictures. Findings indicated that messages that the children conveyed to their teachers included important information about language development and family cultural identity. Results also indicated teacher strategies that helped and hindered child's ability to communicate during the photo-narration process. Through the photo-narration process, some students described the details of the subjects or backgrounds. Others explained their reason for taking the picture. All children told stories about their photos that conveyed verbal representation of the child's view of his or her reality, which then conveyed messages about the unique language and culture of the child, family, and community.

Teachers varied in their response to child voice during the photo-narration. Keat, Strickland, and Marinak (2009) became aware of the influence of "genuine encounter," which was defined in their study as focused attention on personal involvement. Teachers who created a genuine encounter with each child during the narration process moved their seats closer to the child, looked in the child's face, or showed intense interest by using facial gestures in order for the child to feel like he or she was being heard. This research study had key findings. Dialogue between teachers and immigrant students is not simply about words but about the art of reciprocal listening that foreshadows the child's voice in such a way that invites opportunity to be heard and learn. It is also the bridge to connect immigrant children's lives and native-born teachers' lives. That bridge rests in the child's voice. The language barrier can be overcome when children guide their teachers to understand how to help with language skill development and become connected despite the small English vocabulary immigrant students might know.

Applying Teacher Learning in New York City

I am currently a Kindergarten teacher in a diverse community in Brooklyn. There are many cultures in my classroom, including Chinese, Islamic, and Hispanic. As a new teacher of many diverse students, I have recognized myself in much of the research that I have found. Being that I grew up in a small Caucasian community, entering a public school to teach, at first, was difficult. My schooling consisted of Catholic school from the age of four until the age of eighteen. There, I developed cognitively, socially, and academically with mainly white Catholic practitioners mostly from a shared cultural heritage. It was easy for our schools to lack a diversified curriculum. The research on multiculturalism not only opened my eyes up to how to become a more effective teacher, but it also gave me an opportunity to relate to the diverse students in my school by conducting an action research project. This project, the basis for my thesis, strove to help my colleagues and me develop better teacher-student relationships with our students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

The majority of the school population was of Islamic descent. I chose to focus on the Urdu culture for my thesis. I not only wanted to gain a better understanding of my diverse students, but I wanted to create a fair and welcoming classroom environment in which all could learn, despite differences and abilities. This thesis chronicles that journey.

Important terms

student-teacher connection- the act of bonding or linking together, relating to each other

culture- a set of shared values, traditions, or assumptions that form a particular group

multi-culturalism- the preservation of different cultures or cultural identities within a unified society, as a state or nation.

diversity- the state of being different or dissimilar

differentiated instruction- providing students with different avenues to acquire content and to learn.

idealist-one who pursues high or noble principles, purposes, or goals

teacher apprehension- concerns about lack of knowledge about language, in this thesis particularly and cultures within the classroom

genuine encounter- a focused attention with a special intensity born of direct, personal involvement (Hughes, Cavell & Jackson, 1999)

Chapter 3: Methods

Participants

This action research project was engaged by three early childhood public school teachers in New York, who worked with the researcher, also herself a fourth participant. After signing consent forms (Appendix A), three teachers (labeled A, B, and C for confidentiality) agreed to work with me to explore our students' cultures because they, too, had similar interests to address problems of teacher-student connections that they faced in their classrooms. The novice teachers were American, middle-class women, ranging from ages twenty-six to thirty-five, some with tenure but less than ten years of teaching experience.

Table 1: Participant Description

Participants	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Researcher
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female
Years Teaching	3	5	2	1
Grade for 2013	Kindergarten	Kindergarten	Kindergarten	Kindergarten
Background	White American Middle Class	Spanish American Middle Class	White American Middle Class	White American Middle Class

With an open invitation and informed consent, three parents of Urdu descent volunteered to meet with the three teachers and me to discuss some concerns and points of interest in the United States' public school system.

Instruments

This study consisted primarily of note-taking and reflections among the three teachers and myself. I provided each teacher with a notebook, where they wrote down notes or opinions based on what they read and researched, which included novels, biographies, and literature of the Urdu culture. The teachers used the notebooks provided for reflection and guidance as they attempted to explore their students' culture.

Activities

Based on the majority of the teachers' vote, we held ten weekly meetings on Wednesdays in my classroom during the children's lunchtime recess, lasting approximately twenty-five to thirty minutes. We discussed the exploration into the Urdu culture as well as the importance of diversity in classrooms. Also, we explored ways we could use strategies for behavior management and learning in the classrooms as well as our overall reflection based on our new understanding of the Urdu culture. Each week, we took turns beginning a discussion. We discussed what we read and learned, as well as issues, whether past or current ones, that arose in the classroom. We gave input and shared our opinions, helping each other explore the Urdu culture. As we explored together, we took notes and wrote down insights in our notebooks that were added to what we had already written about before we shared. At one point during the weekly meetings, three Urdu parents joined us for a discussion as well. The teachers and I provided them with questions in advance, hoping to gain insight from their answers about the culture and how to use it within my classroom (Appendix B).

Table 2 presents the calendar of study topics that we discussed, including the resources that we explored (Appendix C). The weeks were planned to provide insight into general areas we did not know much about or understand, such as gender roles, religion, and culture. In addition, we knew we wanted to understand parents' thoughts about education and to apply our learning within our classrooms. The calendar of activities for the weeks we had for our study therefore had three general areas. Weeks 1-5 offered direct study; weeks 6 and 7 focused on parents; weeks 8-10 offered reflective

time around implementation of new ideas we hoped would build our relationships with students.

Table 2: Calendar of Study Topics

Week 1	Read <i>Early Urdu Literacy, Culture, and History</i> by S. Faruqi pages 55-72. Create a K-W-L chart collaboratively among teachers
Week 2	Read <i>Gender, Sex, and the City</i> by R. Vanita pages 44-62. Discuss importance of diversity.
Week 3	Read <i>Gender, Sex, and the City</i> by R. Vanita pages 75-100. Discuss importance of diversity.
Week 4	Read <i>I am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced</i> by N. Ali chapters 3-5. Discuss gender roles in Urdu culture.
Week 5	Read <i>The Qur'an: English Paraphrased</i> by S. Qarai pages 79-96. Discuss Urdu beliefs.
Week 6	Urdu parent interviews. Take Notes.
Week 7	Reflection on Urdu parent interviews Discuss important topics from interviews
Week 8	Strategies/implementations for better teacher-student connections in the classroom.
Week 9	Strategies/implementations for better teacher-student connections in the classroom continued.
Week 10	Reflection and overall discussions about our exploration and understanding of culture (include implementations that worked/did not work in classrooms)

Chapter 4: Results

During the first five weeks, teachers A, B, C, and I explored what for us was the newly discovered culture of Urdu. We shared important facts about the origin, early history, culture, traditions, and language. We read each other's notes and added our own inputs on each weekly topic as well as close reading to better examine what we had researched.

The last five weeks of our weekly meetings consisted of a more hands on approach within our action research project. In an attempt to create a friendly, welcoming environment within our classroom for all students, Teachers A, B, C and I decided to take our exploration of the Urdu culture a step further. We suggested strategies to use in our classrooms for our Urdu students, to make them feel more accepted in our school community of mostly Caucasian adults who were teaching and inspiring them. Based on our new understanding of the culture, the teachers and I agreed to implement certain strategies to see if connections between teachers and students would improve. At the beginning of the study, the student-teacher connection with Urdu students in all four of our classrooms was minimal. There were not many discussions that took place in the classrooms, nor was there good behavior, especially among the Urdu boys. We noticed that many Urdu boys acted out much more than the females, who were usually withdrawn and timid. It was in our attempt to ease such impairment in order to fully understand and bond with our students. I truly did not feel like my Urdu students were reaching their potential in learning if they were timid or had behavioral issues in the classroom. They were afraid to speak up or ask for advice, and at times, resented what I suggested due to a lack of student-teacher connection.

A qualitative review of our discussions each week showed many similar themes between teachers A, B, C, and myself. We all focused on punishments and time-outs; we lacked understanding of the Urdu culture, students lacked interest in subject areas; we all felt a language barrier between ourselves and our students; and we did not understand gender roles and other characteristics of Urdu students.

Week 1: Introduction

Teachers A, B, C, and I studied important facts about the Urdu origin, early history, culture and traditions, and language. We observed each other's notes and added our own inputs on each topic as well as conducted close readings, picking pieces of texts to examine and get a better understanding of what we researched.

Urdu is one of the official languages of both the Middle East and India. It is very similar to Hindi, another common language of India. Most of the vocabulary used in Urdu derives from the Persian language. According to *Early Urdu Literacy, Culture, and History (2001)*, Islam is practiced by ninety-five percent of Urdu speakers. The remaining percent is either Christian or Hindu.

We learned that Islam is one of the fastest growing religions of the West, ranking second in largest religious denomination in mostly Canada, Great Britain, and The United States (Meacham, 2009). Because it continues to grow today, teachers A, B, C, and I agreed that we needed to research more about the religion and Urdu culture, especially because the majority of our students in our classrooms are of that descent.

Weeks 2, 3, and 4: Gender Roles and Customs

Family in the Urdu culture is based on patriarchal rule with extended families that include close and distant relatives that help one another when needed. Men assume the

positions of workers outside the home. They provide money to take care of their families and make decisions. Women care for the children and the homes they live in.

There were many interesting customs that we learned about. One custom, which can be essential when greeting or coming into contact with our students' parents, is that men only shake hands with men in the Urdu culture. A handshake follows a customary greeting with the Urdu words, "salaam alaykum," which means peace upon you. They are not permitted to shake hands with or hug women, although many fathers had done so with us. We also learned that cross gender relationships and dating are considered unacceptable. The majority of this culture has arranged marriages at an early age. The families choose who their children will wed. Some are even taken out of school to become married and start a family. In *Gender, Sex and the City (2012)*, we covered many cultural "dos and don'ts" that were often connected to the culture's main religion, Islam. For example, Urdu people must show respect for their elders, and dress conservatively. It is impolite to refuse a gift, although one may not want it. They are forbidden to serve alcohol or give it as a gift. The Urdu culture eats with their right hands; their left hands are considered unclean and reserved for hygiene. They are not allowed to point their index fingers at another person or discuss women, religion and other personal issues amongst themselves. The Urdu culture cannot cross their legs when sitting because the bottom of their shoe is considered offensive. Friday is considered their holy day of the week; it is a day of rest. They pray five times a day; at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening.

The Urdu alphabet consists of thirty eight letters that are written in horizontal lines from right to left, which is opposite from English. Numerals are written from left to

right like English, however. We discovered that the Urdu language does not use definite articles, which clarified prior concerns about our students' speaking skills.

Week 5: The Qur'an

For prompting a discussion, I introduced Qarai's 2003 English translation of the Holy book, the Qur'an, to my fellow colleagues, during one of our weekly meetings. The Qur'an is known to be a book filled with the words of Allah sent to the prophet, Muhammad on December 22, 609 CE. In other words, it is the revelation from God. It proclaims life after death and how to live a correct way of life. Believers hold that Allah has created Paradise for those who live correctly, and Hell for those who make poor decisions.

I chose to bring this holy book to our study because of an article I found about misinformation and stereotyping of Islamic people. The article made me want my colleagues and me to learn more about Islam. Rather than strictly researching facts, I wanted us to experience what Islam is about from an Islamic point of view and how believers suffer from negative stereotypes. For once, we would put ourselves in their shoes and feel what it was like being Islamic in America. In the Niyozov and Pluim (2009) article, they concluded that Muslims are viewed by Americans as violent people and characterized as terrorists and half of Americans portray Muslims negatively. My hope was to not have my colleagues fall into that category. My goal for presenting the Qur'an was to have us learn about Islam. Teachers were not encouraged to follow it or believe in it, but simply gain an understanding of what the Islamic people were about and to become familiar with what they believe and do. With that, we as teachers hopefully would recognize and reject common stereotypes and misunderstandings.

The Qur'an was a very useful tool in disproving the stereotypes about Islam. By using a close reading strategy, one that we are familiar with that we used in the classroom, we picked important pieces from the Holy book. I began the discussion about common messages that were similar found in the Catholic Bible, like good will and kind hearts. Teacher A stated that Islamic religion was similar to her Catholic religion in a sense that faithfulness was key for obeying God. Teacher B agreed, adding that Islamic people, like Catholics, must live truthful lives as well as being honest. Teacher C, who did not have a choice of religion, stated that she once viewed Islamic people as savages, but after reading the Qur'an, they believe just like every other religion, proclaiming honesty and purity. "Although I do not believe in Muhammad's revelation from God, I certainly need to respect those who do," said Teacher C. Introducing the Qur'an to my fellow colleagues made a great impact in the way that we might approach their students in the future.

Weeks 6 and 7: Urdu Parent Interviews and Teacher Reflections

What better way to explore and become more familiar with the culture than to ask someone who lives in it? By inviting parents to our study group, we wanted to show parents that we, as teachers, were trying our best to connect with our Urdu students. We felt that the best way to truly understand our Urdu students was through communication with their parents.

After welcoming the four parents, labeled Parent, A, B, and C for confidentiality purposes, into our weekly meeting, we introduced ourselves and asked them a series of questions about the Urdu culture as well as how they viewed American traditions. They

took turns conversing amongst us, answering rather opinionatedly and as clearly as possible.

Parent A was from Pakistan. He was a wealthy father whose occupation was a doctor. He was well dressed and had very mature body language. He had four children and a wife who took care of the children at home. He spoke clearly and honestly. When asked about an Islamic teacher's role in his child's life, he answered that Islamic teachers were perceived to be the educators in their culture. Teachers were given the utmost respect because they influence the children of tomorrow. He said every family has the mind set of getting ahead in life and rising above the social stratification in which they were placed. By educating oneself, people achieve a position of power because they allow themselves to break free of the limits that society put upon them, thus allowing them to move up in life. To him, that was why education was emphasized in Urdu culture. He said, "We want to become the future doctors, lawyers, engineers, CEOs, and entrepreneurs of the world and bring about change."

We continued our interview by asking him how he felt about American teachers teaching his child. He replied that American teachers were different and similar at the same time. They were perceived to be educators in Urdu culture. However, there was also an aspect where it might be hard for the different cultures to work cohesively because of the different outlook we had based on our cultures. He felt Urdu teachers might emphasize more mathematics and sciences because they were more focused on creating opportunities for youth that would propel them to the highest level. American educators might focus more in the fact that a child should be well-rounded with focus on the liberal arts aspects as well as their heavy courses such as mathematics and sciences. He also

believed that American education empowered children to be more creative and innovative in their way of thought, bringing about new ideas and change

Lastly, we asked for his opinion about cultural diversity in the classrooms. Parent A said that the diversity presented in classrooms within the United States, especially in New York, as a melting pot of different cultures and background, was unmatched anywhere else. He thought it allowed students to learn about and accept different cultures, impacting students' thought processes. He felt diversity allowed for the sharing of different perspectives, helping students to be more open minded about things occurring around them, allowing for students to become well-rounded.

Parent B was a middle class, stay-at-home mother. She came to America from India when she was twenty-four. Parent B had three children with her husband. Together they owned a family deli in Brooklyn. She was very strong-willed and traditional. She felt that there should be more Islamic teachers in America. She said, "I respect the fact that my children need to learn English, but I am sad that they are losing their native language and traditions. It is hard for me to speak to my own children, especially during homework and studying, because I have poor English."

Parent C was a middle-class father who worked for a private cab service. He came to America with his wife fifteen years ago. They had one son together. His English was broken, but his message was clear. Were his words to be put down in standard English, they would have been as follows: "I love America. People are free to do what they want. I was not happy in Pakistan. I want my son to be able to live his own life but not forget where he came from. He will keep his traditions with him but I want him to see the world." He then concluded, "It is great that he is with boys and girls who are different

than him. My son is very happy here and it scares me to think what he would be doing in Pakistan right now.”

Before the interview ended, the teachers and I thanked the three parents for their time and reminded them why they were asked to participate in our meeting--to help us better understand the culture by listening to different views of Urdu culture. We concluded the meeting by asking for ideas that we could use in the classroom to create a welcoming and supportive environment. Parents A and C suggested that we use common phrases in both Urdu and English. Parent B agreed that that idea was very good as well, especially since she was the one most concerned about her children losing their native language and traditions.

Weeks 8, 9, and 10: Strategies and Accommodations for Diversity in Classrooms

Because our communities now consist of individuals who represent a wide variety of experiences, abilities, and backgrounds, these diversities are reflected in our classrooms with the children's cultures, races, and ethnic backgrounds as well as languages and appearances. It is important for teachers to make sure each student reaches his or her fullest potential by being sensitive to and aware of diverse needs of children and families that they serve. In this study, our final efforts focused on implementing activities that might accomplish this goal.

Strategy 1: Culture Day

Teachers A, B, C, and I, with the approval of the principal, began our first attempt for implementation in the classrooms by creating “Culture Day” in the kindergarten classes monthly. Our first attempt was to create a welcoming and accepting environment

in order to establish a student-teacher connection. Its aim was to explore cultures within the class with our students to show that we, as teachers, accepted them for who they were. My three colleagues and I chose to celebrate Urdu first because it reflected the majority of our students. We wanted our non-Urdu students to become actively involved and appreciate the Urdu culture as well.

Culture Day was a special day when parents joined in on the celebration of a specific culture within the classroom. Parents who attended were asked to cook or bake with their children a special Urdu dish of their choice. If they were not able to cook or bake, they could purchase what they wanted to. Students presented their dish with the help of their parents by telling the class about the dish chosen, for example, why it was special to them or how it was made. Consent forms were sent home for parents to sign, noting any food allergies (Appendix D).

All of us felt that our first implementation was a success. We noticed many changes in attitudes after the Culture Day presentations. During the next meeting, we discussed the progress from Culture Day. In my classroom, Urdu students were more interactive during morning routines and circle time. Teacher A reported that the next morning, six out of her ten Urdu students' spirits were lifted. "They were happy and giggly, and at times I had to tell them to stop talking, a thing I very rarely had to do before. I cannot believe how much they were talking to one another about the fun they had the day prior." Teacher B insisted that her Urdu students' behaviors in the classroom dramatically changed as well. "The students are beginning to warm up to me, finally." Teacher C noticed that there were more interactions between Urdu students and non-Urdu students during play time, especially in the Kitchen Center, where they re-enacted

cooking foods from Culture Day. Urdu students were able to present their favorite dish and listen to feedback from fellow classmates about what they had introduced. It certainly gave them a boost of confidence, making them feel welcomed and appreciated in the classrooms. The parents who attended also felt a sense of pride, thanking us for introducing such a great way to "break the cultural differences" of the community.

Strategy 2: Multi-Cultural Bookshelf

Our second attempt to create a welcoming and accepting environment in order to establish a student-teacher connection was rather costly but would be beneficial over the long run. When meeting the next two times, the teachers and I agreed that we wanted to take the cultural exploration to a new level. Because of the low funding in our school, our next implementation was completely funded by ourselves. We wanted to create an extended bookshelf in each of our libraries strictly for our diverse cultures, labeled, "Multi-Cultural Books." We researched and found many relevant grade-leveled picture books written in different languages about cultures and traditions. Because of the cost, we agreed to purchase four books from each language group. Among the many languages were Urdu, Mandarin, and Spanish, the three major languages of our classes (Appendix E). The objective of this implementation was to create a "safe haven" for our bilingual students. As seen in our classrooms, learning English at a young age could be intimidating and overwhelming, especially if there was another language spoken at home. We created the extended bookshelf so students could connect to their roots. Although it was important that we reinforced English as the dominant language, we thought that the multi-cultural bookshelf could be created in our classrooms so that our diverse students felt like part of home was with them always. They were allowed to read a book from the

multi-cultural bookshelf three times a week, whether it was independently or with a partner. We created a weekly sign in sheet to monitor who was using this resource and when they were there. Students were also encouraged to look at picture books from other languages so that they could see that they were not alone, that we are all unique in a special but different way.

The multi- cultural bookshelf was a great idea for our target population. Our Urdu students used this resource weekly. I noticed a great change in most of my Urdu boys. They retreated more to the extended bookshelf rather than getting themselves in trouble by acting out or being silly. My timid Urdu girls even used it frequently. Four out of my five girls eagerly showed me their responses to the books read by drawing pictures of what they learned or their favorite part of the story that were eventually hung on the cork board above the library for all to see. Teacher A reticently admitted, “By creating my multi-cultural bookshelf, I realized that I don’t scream as much at my Urdu students. My classroom is finally loud, but not from my voice; from students conversing freely and confidently. This definitely helped my Urdu students break out of their shell.” Teacher B observed that her usual four behavioral problem Urdu students were calmer when they were permitted to go to the resource. “I truly feel that they have a sense of comfort in my classroom finally. They are even enthusiastic to share what they have read with non-Urdu students. They have reached their comfort zone and I am so relieved. Teacher C shared a story about one particular Urdu girl who had cried constantly and was very stubborn (labeled Student A). “When I created my bookshelf and encouraged all to read, Student A was hesitant at first. She always brought to school a small pocket- sized bear, to ease the separation anxiety that she had, that was placed on her desk. Student A knew

she was not allowed to carry it around with her, but I let her bring it to the bookshelf. After a few days of looking at the pictures in the Urdu books, and seeing others sharing similar interests, she placed her pocket-sized bear in her school bag. The next morning, I frantically looked for it around the vicinity of her desk, expecting a melt-down, only to realize that she decided to keep it home. She no longer needed this object to cope with anxiety. She felt comfortable in my classroom, and most importantly, with me!”

Despite the extra costs, I truly feel that we made an extreme difference in our classrooms. Our Urdu students are slowly but surely approaching us, whether it is asking for assistance or simply engaging in a conversation. Student-teacher connections are surely forming.

Our discussions about exploring the Urdu culture with the three parents turned out well. We were able to learn about the culture from them and listen to real experiences that they went through. It is safe to say that the teachers and I have a new found respect for this culture. They are very smart, kind-hearted, and traditional. It was great hearing suggestions from them. We made the parents feel like they had a sense of unity within our class.

The next morning, after practicing numerous times, I picked up my children from the cafeteria. I stood by the door as they entered the class and said, “Salaam Alakum,” which means “Hello” in Urdu. Some of my Urdu students giggled; others’ eyes lit up, never expecting to hear those very words exit my mouth. I knew from this day on, it was going to be a great year. It was the first day that I received a hug at the door.

Chapter 5: Reflection

Inspiration

Being in a school where I have mostly worked as a substitute teacher for three years before receiving a full time job, I was able to observe all the different types of ethnicities, traditions, and characteristics of the children enrolled there. But I was far from an expert. Among the many cultures, in order of largest to lowest percent of children are, Arabic, Indian, Asian, Hispanic, and Caucasian.

What inspired me to explore my students' cultures occurred during a typical day in a kindergarten classroom where I teach. Every day in September, for Social Studies, the kindergarten teachers chose a "Star Child of the Day" to represent leaders for their classrooms. Each star child was chosen because he or she has followed classroom rules, set good examples for others on how to behave, and has completed all of their work. Rules, either classroom ones or based on overall behavior, and leadership were two important topics discussed early on in kindergarten curriculum, so what better way to re-enforce it than by choosing such role models in the classroom. Every child got to be a leader once. After reflecting on who and when each student became a star child, I noticed a pattern across the majority of the kindergarten classrooms. Displayed on our bulletin boards in the classroom were pictures and facts about each star child, in order of the days selected. Having been a new teacher and frequently asking for assistance from my fellow colleagues, I noticed that the children of Muslim descent were more towards the end of the line for star child on the bulletin boards. This situation made me very curious as to why it was happening this way. Before knowing what I know now about the Urdu culture, I fell into the trap of assuming negative things about this culture. After constantly

collaborating and doing research with other teachers who had felt similar ways as I did, we realized it was time to make a change in ourselves and our classrooms. Instead of assuming that bad behavior came about from this culture, we took action and implemented strategies to ease the tension between the Urdu students and teachers and tried to create a better bond or connection between the two. It is safe to say that we were very successful. There were positive changes in the students' behavior and overall attitude within each classroom.

Awareness and Education

Every culture has its own ways of living, its own rules, traditions, and communication. Becoming aware of my students' cultures has opened me up to a new world. I am able to see things in a new light. Growing up in a secluded Catholic school, I was only around boys and girls who believed in what I believed in. There was never questioning about other cultures or how to meet their needs. When I reflect back about the students in my classroom, I now realize what exactly I am dealing with. Everyone is unique and are who they are because of traditions and beliefs that were handed down to them. These students in my classroom have brought unique challenges and artifacts which I call archives. As I become more knowledgeable and involved with these diverse students, their archives grow and get more enriched.

Confidence and Collaboration

Being a teacher can be very overwhelming. There are many things that a teacher does in a simple day. A teacher wears many hats; he or she needs to multi task constantly, being able to adjust to whatever is presented. A teacher acts as a nurse, friend, role model, law enforcer, and guardian all at once in order to fulfill the needs of each child.

By conducting this action research project, I have become a little more than aware and educated with my students' cultures. I am a lot more confident as a teacher now than I was before. I was able to confide in my fellow colleagues, share similar points of view and worries, and even different opinions and strategies. We worked together as a team to make such problems and concerns lessen. It gave me great confidence because I knew that I was not alone. I was not the only teacher who had trouble connecting and understanding his or her students. I no longer felt like the "rookie" teacher; we all faced similar concerns and issues within our classroom and it felt amazing to be able to share my stories with the other teachers. It is safe to say that our weekly conferences consisted of therapeutic and educational meetings, in a sense. We took turns listening to each other speak, giving suggestions when needed. I knew that they had my back, and I definitely had theirs.

Most of all, this exploration changed me for the better. I no longer stereotype when overwhelmed and unsure. I valued everyone's beliefs and accept diversity. I gained a sense of patience for the unknown. I came into this action research project hoping to connect better with students, but I did more than that; I created a new me.

Appendices

Appendix A

Participant Consent

The Department of Education at Wagner College supports the practice of protection of lowing will provide information about my research project that will help you in deciding whether you wish to participate. If you agree to participate, please be aware that you are free to withdraw at any point throughout the duration of the study without any penalty. In this action research project, you will be asked to collaborate with me in learning about Urdu culture using a variety of novels and biographies. We will meet weekly, with human participation in research. Each of us will be taking a lead in different weeks, to discuss what we have learned as well as share experiences, questions, and prior knowledge You would record your thoughts in a notebook that I will provide for you. It will be about what you have learned and its impact on your practice, sharing thoughts from notebooks with me for analysis.

The goals of the study are a threefold; 1) to learn more about Urdu culture, 2) to explore how teachers might experience learning about their students' cultures when those cultures differ from their own, and 3) to learn how teachers might change their practices to provide students with more connected environments as a result of learning more about the students' cultures. All discussions will remain confidential and no study information will be associated with your name.

*If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me through phone or email:
Samantha.Townson@wagner.edu or 9176480129 as well as my advisor:
Karen.Demoss@wagner.edu.

Please indicate with your signature on the space below that you understand your rights and agree to participate in the action research project.

Once again, your participation is solicited, yet strictly voluntary. All information will be kept confidential and your name will not be associated with any findings.

Signature of Participant Name

Investigator

Print Name

Print Name

Appendix B

Parent Interview Informed Consent and Interview Questions

Thank you for considering speaking with our study group. Because the Department of Education at Wagner College supports the practice of protection of human participation in research, I wanted to inform you that the group you would talk to is participating in a study that is part of my master's research, conducting a study to help myself and other teachers learn about Urdu culture. We would like to invite you to share things you think we should know about your culture. We would love to hear your views about the topics such as:

- Roles of teachers in your culture
- Difference with teacher roles in American
- Views on cultural diverse populations in the classroom
- Customs and traditions, roles of family and beliefs
- Gender roles
- Educational values of your culture
- Status and characteristics of a teacher (gender, economics, age)
- Things you'd want to change about our school for your child to feel more connected.

These are simply some ideas of things that you can talk about, but you needn't talk about these things in particular and you will not be asked to speak about anything you might feel uncomfortable about. Our goal is to simply learn from you whatever you might want to share. This study is not about you or about the students. It is about how we as teachers can learn. If you agree to come talk to us your name will not be part of the records.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me through phone or email: Samantha.Townson@wagner.edu or 9176480129 as well as my advisor: Karen.Demoss@wagner.edu. Please indicate with your signature on the space below that you understand your rights and agree to speak to the teacher study group. Once again, your participation is solicited, yet strictly voluntary. All information will be kept confidential and your name will not be associated with any findings.

Signature of Participant

Signature of Investigator

Print Name

Print Name

Date

Date

Appendix C

Materials Used for Research

- Early Urdu Literacy, Culture, and History by Shamsur R. Faruqi
- I am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced by Nujood Ali
- Gender, Sex, and the City by Ruth Vanita
- The Qur'an: English Paraphrased by Sayyid Ali Qarai
- Five notebooks

Appendix D

Cultural Day Consent Invitation and Consent Form

Dear Kindergarten Parents,

The Kindergarten Teachers at P.S. 104 cordially invite you to Culture Day on Wednesday, March 13, 2013. Help us recognize and celebrate the Urdu culture by bringing in a traditional Islamic dish of your choice. All parents are welcomed to join!

* Please indicate if you would like to attend:

Yes

No

* Please sign your signature below if your child is permitted to participate in our celebration.

* Please list any allergies your child has:

Appendix E

Multi-Cultural Books

Urdu

- Buri and Marrow written by Henriette Barkow and illustrated by Lizzie Finlay
- The Children of Lir written by Dawn Casey and illustrated by Diana Mayo
- Journey Through Islamic Art written by Naima Robert and illustrated by Diana Mayo
- Sahir Goes to the Dentist written and illustrated by Chris Petty

Mandarin

- Li's Chinese New Year written by Fang Wang and illustrated by Jen Corfield
- Flash, Bang, Whee! written by Karen Clark and illustrated by Ian White
- Yeh-hsien written by Dawn Casey and illustrated by Richard Holland
- Keeping Up With the Cheetah written by Lindsay Camp and illustrated by Jill Newton

Spanish

- Grandma's Saturday Soup written by Sally Fraser and illustrated by Derek Brazell
- Nita Goes to the Hospital written by Henriette Barkow and illustrated by Chris Perry
- Welcome to the World, Baby written by Naima Robert and illustrated by Derek Brazell
- Handa's Surprise written and illustrated by Eileen Brown

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