Journal of Teacher Education

http://jte.sagepub.com

The Role of Empathy in Teaching Culturally Diverse Students: A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Beliefs

Gretchen McAllister and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jte.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/53/5/433

Published by:

SAGE Publications

http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE)

Additional services and information for *Journal of Teacher Education* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://jte.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://jte.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations (this article cites 7 articles hosted on the
SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):
http://jte.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/53/5/433

Editor's Note: *This article draws from Gretchen McAllister's doctoral dissertation which received the 2000 Outstanding Dissertation Award from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.*

THE ROLE OF EMPATHY IN TEACHING CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TEACHERS' BELIEFS

Gretchen McAllister
Northern Arizona University

Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, Dissertation Chair
Emory University

This study provides a description of 34 practicing teachers' beliefs regarding the role of empathy as an attribute in their effectiveness with culturally diverse students. Empathy involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral components that teachers believed were manifested in their practice. All of these teachers had participated in a multicultural professional development program geared to fostering culturally responsive practice. Through a content analysis of more than 125 documents, three themes in teachers' practices emerged: more positive interactions with culturally diverse students, more supportive classroom climates, and more student-centered practices. In addition, teachers discussed their most valuable learning experiences in the professional development course. These included a cross-cultural simulation, cultural immersion trips, and their own experiences as minorities. The results from this study underscore the importance of creating contexts in teacher education and professional development programs in which teachers and preservice teachers use and nurture empathetic dispositions and behaviors.

An empathic disposition has been seen as a desirable trait for teachers in diverse settings. This disposition has been associated with increased sensitivity to different cultures (Germain, 1998) and has been identified as a key characteristic in being effective in urban diverse schools (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Gordon, 1999). Specifically, empathetic people take on the perspective of an-other culture and respond to another individual from that person's perspective (Goleman, 1998; Oliner & Oliner, 1995). Noddings (1984) referred to this as "feeling with," wherein one does not feel for or act on behalf of an individual; rather, one is with the individual in a nonjudgmental fashion. This type of empathy has also been referred to as "altruism," which

433

implies action on behalf or in service to other's needs (Goodman, 2000).

This empathic disposition often manifests itself in teachers' caring relationships with students. Researchers have noted that students, especially students of color, who have caring relationships with their teachers are more motivated and perform better academically than students who do not (Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; Irvine, 1990). In addition, empathy can potentially foster openness, attentiveness, and positive relationships. In culturally diverse classrooms, being open and flexible helps teachers adjust to varying contexts (Delpit, 1995). Teachers are better able to modify pedagogy and curricula to fit their students' needs, such as the teacher who changed a classroom ritual to be more comfortable for her Vietnamese students by simply offering her students multiple ways to say goodbye rather than obliging them to hug her before they left the classroom.

Researchers who have explored teachers who are effective with diverse students (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1994) or in urban settings (e.g., Gordon, 1999) have identified empathy as a component of teachers' success but have not focused on it directly. This article provides an opportunity to illuminate the role of empathy, through the voices of 34 educators, in the teaching of culturally diverse students. Teachers' comments will be shared in light of the professional development course in which they all participated. The goal of this course was to foster culturally responsive practice.

Though empathy and its associated behaviors are emphasized as important by teachers in this research, as well as by researchers (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2000; Gordon, 1999; Noddings, 1984), some have questioned the role of empathy in working with culturally diverse students. For example, Rosenberg (1998) found that her White preservice teachers' empathy provided a "false sense of involvement" that could be dangerous if they assume they know and understand their students although they may actually have a superficial understanding (p. 9). Such a "false sense of involvement" may also lead to the "paradox of appropriation," in which a person equates his or her own experiences with the other person's, essentially erasing the distinctions between her or his own and the other person's experience (Spelman, 1995). Another critique concerns the emotional connection that empathy implies. A singular focus on the affective dimension of teachers' relationships with their students of color may obscure the need to address broader, far-reaching institutional issues such as racism, unequal school resources, and discriminatory policies and procedures like tracking and discipline. Caution needs to be taken when emphasizing the importance of empathy, because empathy is a necessary, but not a sufficient, requirement for becoming a culturally responsive teacher or even an effective teacher with diverse populations. Technical competence and subject matter knowledge are also important (Kennedy, 1991). Though one must be aware of this tension, teacher education and professional development programs must not be steered away from fostering an empathetic attitude. Such dispositions can potentially enhance teacher effectiveness in diverse classrooms.

This article shares part of the results from a larger study examining 51 teachers' beliefs about diversity (McAllister, 1999). I focus on teachers' beliefs and perceptions about the role of empathy in their teaching practice. Because all of the teachers participated in the same professional development program, they also discussed empathy in regard to that experience. Examining teachers' beliefs and practice is a very complex process and often relies on self-reported data (McAllister, 1999). This article does not purport to present any causal relationships between the professional development program and teachers' reports on empathy; rather, the purpose of this article is to share with the reader the various ways the concept of empathy emerged within the context of the professional development program.

METHOD

The 34 teachers in the study expressed beliefs regarding the role of empathy in being effective with their students. All of the teachers were involved in a multicultural professional devel-

TABLE 1 Personal and School Demographics of the Sample (*N* = 34)

	n	%
Race/gender		
Latino female	2	6
White female	6	18
White male	1	2
African American female	25	74
Teaching experience		
0-5 years	10	29
6-10 years	6	18
More than 10 years	18	53
School demographics		
Predominantly African American[a]	20	59
Racially mixed[b]	14	41
0%-25% in free lunch program	2	9
26%-50% in free lunch program	8	9
51%-75% in free lunch program	10	29
More than 75% in program	24	54

a. Schools with enrollments of 75% or more African American students.
b. Schools with a 60% minority (non-White)/40% White racial population ratio.

opment seminar called CULTURES (Center for Urban Learning/Teaching and Urban Research in Education and Schools). The goal of the CULTURES program was "to create a professional development center that will assist [local] practicing elementary and middle school teachers to work effectively with culturally diverse students and enhance the quality of teaching and learning in urban schools" (Irvine, 1993). The teachers, all from a southeastern city, went through the 40-hour program in cohorts of 14 to 18 teachers. Each cohort reflected a diversity of county and city school systems, grade levels, teaching experiences, gender, and race (though most cohort groups were predominantly African American and female). Table 1 presents the demographics of the teachers discussed in this study.

Three quarters of the 34 teachers were African American, of whom 11 taught at high-poverty, predominately African American schools and had more than 6 years of teaching experience. Four of the White teachers taught at racially mixed schools, and 3 taught at predominately African American schools. Demographic information revealed that teachers had varying levels of previous cross-cultural experiences. Four of the African American teachers, the 2 Latina

teachers, and 2 of the White teachers (all teaching at predominately African American schools) came to the seminar with previous cross-cultural experiences gained either through traveling or living in diverse communities. All of the other African American teachers and the 4 other White teachers came with no cross-cultural experience or, minimally, had attended one multicultural course. The next section describes the seminar in which all the teachers participated.

CULTURES Program

The CULTURES professional development seminar modeled many of the best practices of multicultural professional development. These practices included the maintenance of an ongoing teacher cohort group, application of skills in teachers' own classrooms, contextualization of theory, and promotion of teacher reflection and dialogue. The course focused on three main strands: culturally responsive pedagogy, cultural awareness, and adaptation of content to culturally diverse students. Various teaching methods were used, such as cooperative learning, role-playing, small group exercises, simulations, community immersion trips, journal writing, lecture, discussion, and examination of research. Consistent with the thinking of researchers and practitioners in the field of intercultural communication, the program was structured along two developmental lines (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983; Hughes-Weiner, 1986). The first was the sequencing of cross-cultural learning from self to other. In the CULTURES course, learning about the concept of culture began with teachers' reflecting on their own culture and its influence on their practice. Researchers (Banks, 1994; Bennett, 1993; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997) assert that teachers must first recognize and understand their own worldview, attitudes, and beliefs to understand the worldviews of others.

The second framework, structuring activities from most familiar to least, supported the first by managing the level of risk involved in the learning process. Cross-cultural learning can be

fraught with ambiguity and anxiety (Paige, 1993). The activities and lectures were structured so that they began with the most familiar and moved toward the least familiar. Teachers began to learn about culture first by observing a familiar environment—a classroom at a culturally diverse school. Subsequent activities increased the level of risk and lack of familiarity, such as involvement in the cross-cultural simulation *Bafa Bafa*. In *Bafa Bafa*, teachers became members of two different cultures (alpha and beta), learned the norms of their culture, and then visited the other culture. The simulation gave participants an opportunity to experience the affective component often associated with an initial cultural immersion trip. After *Bafa Bafa*, guest speakers from the Mexican, Vietnamese, and African American communities shared information about their cultures with the teachers in the seminar room. Finally, the teachers visited families in different cultural communities. The teachers usually went to a Southeast Asian, Mexican, urban Appalachian, or African American community.

Data Sources

I used four data sources to examine teacher's beliefs about empathy. These included teachers' applications to the project, their final projects, their exit interviews, and the CULTURES project report. Three of these sources, final project, exit interviews, and CULTURES report, provided self-reported data from teachers. Teachers' applications provided most of the information for the teacher characteristics (gender, race, years teaching, and school characteristics). Final projects provided information on teachers' thinking and beliefs. The project consisted of three parts: (a) a personal professional development plan for continued learning in the area of cultural diversity, (b) a school plan for development in diversity, and (c) a school community profile. In Parts (a) and (b), teachers were asked to write a

> two part essay (at least five typed pages) describing (1) a personal professional development plan for continued learning in the area of cultural diversity, and (2) a school plan for developing diversity indi-

cating the needs of your school and how you might assist your school in meeting these needs. (Irvine, 1998, pp. 7-8)

In the final project, teachers reflected on what they had learned and what they believed was important for them to learn about culture. For example, teachers included a list of future courses they would want to take or languages they wanted to learn. The exit interviews, which took place after a minimum of 3 months after the CULTURES teachers finished their program, were designed to have the teachers reflect on their CULTURES experience and its relationship to their teaching, their students' learning, their personal and professional lives, and the status of the plans designed in their final projects. The exit interviews usually took place at the teacher's school and lasted about 35 to 60 minutes. The CULTURES project report, which outlined each cohort's experience and evaluation of their program, was used to confirm findings of patterns in the exit interview and final projects.

Analysis

A computer software program, QSR NUDIST (Qualitative Solutions and Research, Non-Numerical, Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing), was used to manage more than 200 documents as well as to code data, create categories, and examine relationships between the categories. QSR NUDIST allows for analysis across data as well as for identification of data across time periods, such as pre- and post-CULTURES. For this particular study, only the post-CULTURES data were examined because the quality and type of data did not allow for assessing changes in teachers' beliefs across the pre/post-CULTURES time period.

Analysis of the data occurred in five stages (Marshall & Rossman, 1989): organizing, coding, generating categories, testing emerging categories, and searching for alternative hypotheses and explanations. All data were placed in the program and analyzed across all three sources for categories. An inductive approach was used to lessen the effect of researcher bias.

All coding emerged from the data themselves rather than from prescribed categories. Pattern matching was used to create coding categories of similar beliefs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). Inconsistencies in coding, such as coder drift, were checked through three returns to the data.

Two outside colleagues verified the coding process (Merriam, 1988). We discussed discrepancies, and I made adjustments to coded excerpts or categories. Negative cases that did not fit the major findings were explored and alternative hypotheses suggested. Given that all the data sources were based on self-report, I verified the strengths of categories by noting the percentage of respondents in each category. I also discussed the findings with the director of CULTURES, who had familiarity with the database, the teachers, and the program. In addition, I checked the findings against the CULTURES evaluation report, which validated the various categories that had emerged from the data.

To maintain reliability, a chain of evidence was created and facilitated through the QSR NUDIST program that kept a history of all coding changes (Yin, 1989). I also maintained a journal of all methodological decisions and processes (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

RESULTS

All 34 of the teachers in this study believed that empathy was an important factor in working effectively with diverse students. Though the teachers used different words to refer to empathy, they all agreed on the essence of what it was. They focused on it as both an affective and cognitive concept. For example, one teacher stated that "they should feel what they [people from other cultures] feel or think what [others] may be thinking." Others focused on the cognitive ability of perspective taking. A teacher stated, "[I should try to put] myself in their place and wonder how I would really feel." Another said that empathy means to "see someone else's point of view" and, through that understanding, create a personal connection with people from various cultures. In this section, first I will focus on teachers' reflections on empathy within the context of the CULTURES seminar, and then I will discuss teachers' beliefs regarding empathy in their teaching practice.

CULTURES and Empathy

The teachers reported that three particular activities of the CULTURES program were valuable. These included (a) involvement in the cross-cultural simulation *Bafa Bafa*, (b) immersion in a cultural community different from their own, and (c) reflection on their own experiences as members of historically oppressed groups. Teachers' comments about their learning in these activities reflected empathetic dispositions and behavior. These activities will be discussed in the order in which the teachers experienced them.

Bafa Bafa Simulation

To build teachers' confidence and comfort regarding their work with culturally diverse students and their families, the CULTURES team structured the activities from low risk to high risk. The simulation *Bafa Bafa* provided a somewhat comfortable setting that assisted learners in experiencing the emotions associated with being in a different culture. This simulation happened within the first few days of the seminar.

Forty-four percent of the teachers believed that this simulation provided an opportunity to experience a new culture and to practice empathy. As teachers experienced visiting and interacting in another "culture," they commented on how the simulation influenced them. One teacher stated, "*Bafa Bafa* sensitized me to immigrants coming into the [United States]." Another said, "It really made me think. This is how they feel and this is how I feel."

Teachers' experiences in the cross-cultural simulation, as a visitor to another culture and as a recipient of visitors to their own culture, evoked other powerful emotions. Teachers felt "ostracized, demoralized, and uncomfortable." Teachers shared how the simulation fostered empathy. For example, one teacher stated, "After taking the CULTURES class, I am more aware of the personal pain and struggle

involved in foreigners that live in the U.S." Another said, "I tried to put myself in their place and I wondered how I would feel if I were in their country and they were the ones [*sic*] trying to find out my problem and my beliefs and traditions." *Bafa Bafa* served as an effective vehicle for helping teachers gain insights and empathy regarding the cross-cultural adjustment and communication process. During the simulation, they had to struggle with communicating to "foreigners" as well as learn how to function effectively in a new culture, an important skill for culturally responsive teachers (Bennett, 1983). For many of the teachers, this was their first time practicing such skills, given that most of them had little previous experience with people from different cultural backgrounds. Only 4 of the teachers who discussed the role of *Bafa Bafa* had any significant previous cross-cultural experience.

Community Immersion

A crucial follow-up to all the activities was an immersion experience in which teachers visited families in their homes. Teachers in this particular data set, as well as in the larger CULTURES evaluation report, believed that the cultural immersion was one of the most valuable aspects of the program. In the multicultural program, all the teachers had an opportunity to visit four different cultural communities (African American, Mexican American, White Appalachian, and Southeast Asian American) and visit with parents, students, and community leaders. It was important to structure the immersion so that the teachers controlled their own level of interaction with community members by engaging with the families at their own comfort levels. For example, whereas some CULTURES teachers observed, others asked a lot of questions and initiated conversations. Because teachers were allowed to construct and control some of the experience, they were able to manage the level of risk. A teacher commented on the usefulness of the parent discussions:

> We seldom have that opportunity [to talk with parents]. Especially for them to come and talk with us in an unrestricted environment that they don't feel they have to prove to us. I think—when we go to

their home, or their grounds they're more at ease and more willing to actually speak their minds.

The teachers reported that they gained greater cross-cultural sensitivity and a sense of empathy from their interactions with parents and other members of these cultural communities. One teacher likened her experience to visiting a foreign country. She stated, "When we went to [that community], and the inner-city different cultures . . . it's just like being in a foreign country sort of. I mean, you just feel like you're out of your little cocoon."

Most of the African American teachers in the study had not had a lot of exposure to the Latin American and Vietnamese communities and realized that they had prejudices that were subsequently broken down after their community visits. A teacher commented on how her perceptions of Vietnamese people changed after visiting with a family at their restaurant.

> When we went to the Vietnamese Restaurant . . . I never thought of a Vietnamese person having a sense of humor, or even interacting the way [the owner's son] did. I just thought they were like a little group by themselves. And they were not so much Americanized, but kind of just to themselves. That man was so—should I say Americanized? I don't want to say Americanized. Warm, friendly, just like one of the guys. He had a sense of humor. If I'm not mistaken he might have said something really funny, like jokingly. I felt like—it was overwhelming all most, because I saw him in a totally different light. If I had not gone there, I would have felt [the Vietnamese] were just soft-spoken people. And they're not going to really let their hair down.

Another African American teacher reflected on the tension between African Americans and Asians and how she was attempting to lessen it in her personal relationships with Vietnamese in her own community.

> The [professional development program] has really created something inside me that really makes me want to do more in terms of trying to bring the cultures together. Especially the Vietnamese, because Blacks and Vietnamese are like that [tense]. And I used to be over there too. But it doesn't have to be that way, because they have their own cultures and we have ours, but we're still people and we can learn from each other. Like the lady at the nail shop, she just loves me to death. When I go in, I say, "Sharla!" and she gets a kick out of it. And we're good friends

now. But before taking the class, it was strictly a business situation. Now she offers me rice and she gave me some sticks to eat with. That's nice.

These intimate first-person interactions were believed by teachers to be "the prime method in learning and understanding the lifestyles of different people." Teachers also thought that direct contact with someone from a different culture, rather than learning through secondary information, was "another way to overcome cultural prejudice," and it was "rewarding to just get in there and learn firsthand." Research has confirmed the importance of such experiences. Steward, Borgers, Chambers, and Brown (1998) have suggested that the mere learning of cultural information does not necessarily engender empathy for the cultural other. The teachers in this study and other researchers from the field of multicultural teacher education indicate that direct contact with individuals from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds is necessary for nurturing empathy and a deeper connection (Zeichner & Melnick, 1995). In addition, the teachers began to understand other cultural communities through the eyes of people within those communities (Cochran-Smith, 1995).

Three teachers stated that the quality of the interaction might be a key component in its power as a learning experience. Part of this quality comes from the design. An effective cultural immersion experience allows people to develop authentic connections based on perceived equal (Allport, 1979) or appropriate power bases. When immersions are not designed with care, they become cultural plunges that reinforce stereotypes rather than break or shift them, however (Grant, 1991). A couple of teachers discussed how they would change how they traveled to foster more authentic interactions. For example, a teacher stated, "I now realize that in my travels, I must move beyond the tourist attractions. I need to spend more time in the heartbeat—the schools, library, churches, and governmental institutions of the countries and cities that I visit." Another teacher commented, "Before [going] abroad I would kind of stand on the outskirts of people's business because I didn't want to intrude. Now I feel I want to get more

involved." These teachers realized that intimate interaction with people from different cultures enhances their sensitivity and contributes to their effectiveness in the classroom.

Self-Reflection

Some teachers believed that being a racial minority or coming from a family that has been part of a historically oppressed group helped them understand their new immigrant or minority students. In the study group, more than 80% of the participants considered themselves to be members of an ethnic minority group, and one quarter of them spoke directly about the relationship between their background and an empathetic disposition. A Latin American teacher stated, "I've been very sensitive with my own children because I suffered [discrimination based on] my own skin." Other teachers spoke more directly of being a minority. For example, one said,

> I've been in an environment where I may have been the only Black, but it's different when you come from a different background [than African American]. You don't even speak the same language and how frustrating I can imagine that being for children.

An Armenian American teacher spoke of her family's history, which she believed could "help [her] be able to understand the pain and suffering many other ethnic groups have had to endure." These teachers found that their own history with oppression could assist them in understanding their own students' experiences as well as assist them in serving their students more effectively.

Empathetic Classroom Practice

In the post-CULTURES data, teachers discussed empathic dispositions and behaviors in the context of CULTURES. They also reported these various aspects of empathy in relationship to their own classrooms, in particular to their practice. Teachers described various attributes that defined empathetic behavior, such as sensitivity, patience, respect, tolerance, acceptance, understanding, flexibility, openness, and humility and discussed how they invoked these

personal qualities when working with culturally diverse students. Teachers' perceptions of empathy in their practice can be placed in three categories: (a) positive interactions with students, (b) supportive classroom environments, and (c) student-centered classrooms. The following sections will provide examples from teachers' self-report of the relationship between their beliefs about empathy and their practice in their classrooms.

Positive Interactions

Various attributes, such as listening, being patient, and being supportive, reflect a receptivity that leads to caring (Noddings, 1984). This type of caring can enhance classroom interactions between teachers and students and eventually create a better learning climate. Teachers in this study connected these various attributes of caring to empathy and believed that such behavior on their part fostered better relations with their students.

Fifty-nine percent of the teachers attributed the changes in their classroom interactions with their students to the fact that they were using more empathic behaviors. For example, a teacher in her exit interview shared a typical comment of teachers in this category:

> Whereas in the past, if the [language minority] students said something to me, it would come in one ear and out the other. But now I really try to tune in to what they're saying. And a lot of times I can't understand what they're saying. . . . Maybe [with] some gesture we can communicate.

In addition to listening, teachers focused on the importance of patience in their interactions with students. Teachers made comments such as, "I was a lot more patient [with my Vietnamese students]" or "I have developed a greater level of patience and tolerance for cultures other than my own."

Sometimes, awareness resulted in openness to students' comments regarding race. One White teacher shared such an incidence:

> I had a situation yesterday with an [African American] kid who said to me, "If I was White you would let me sit where I want." Before [the CULTURES program], I would have addressed a comment like that, because that really bothers me and I want to make sure that the kid understands where I'm coming

from [as to] why would you label that as a racial issue. But now I think I approach it a little differently. I'm less defensive about it. I'm more attuned to, "you probably really do feel that way," versus making that statement just to anger me.

Such openness between the teacher and student can lead to opportunities and spaces for conversations around difficult topics such as racism.

The teachers in this category reported, in their post-CULTURES data, that they gained a new perspective in regard to respecting their students' cultural differences. This respect encouraged them to cast aside assumptions and stereotypes they held about their students. Teachers made comments such as, "I'm learning to respect people. To look at people differently—in a more positive way; I've learned how to reach my students by respecting their cultural differences." Teachers' attention to students' needs helped them reassess situations and interact in a proactive rather than reactive fashion with their students. One teacher discussed how she reassessed and then changed a daily ritual in her classroom to make her Southeast Asian American students feel more comfortable.

> I traditionally end every day with the students lining up and receiving a hug before they leave. My Vietnamese kids were always the stiff huggers until October. Through my understanding of their cultures, I now give all students the choice of a hug, handshake, or high five. This simple act may make children feel more comfortable interacting with me.

Such empathetic behaviors, often associated as an attribute of caring, help promote a positive relationship with students and a positive classroom climate. Moreover, the research literature confirms that empathy and caring are linked with high academic achievement, particularly for culturally diverse students (Foster, 1995; Irvine, 1990).

Supportive Classroom Climate

Fifty-six percent of the teachers in the study were concerned about their classroom environments and often reflected on how culturally diverse students might feel in their classrooms. A teacher stated a comment shared by many in this category: "Students coming from different cultures have fears and needs that need to be met by teachers." For example, a teacher dis-

cussed how she adjusted her support for her language minority students by asking them to sit together so that the "one who is still struggling a little bit would get a lot of support [from her peers]."

Another teacher commented, "I must provide a supportive and affirming environment for students so that they will feel comfortable with their differences instead of ostracized and frustrated." Teachers tried to address these fears by "mak[ing] the classroom a safe place for everybody" and making an effort to make other people feel more welcome and comfortable. This extended to making parents comfortable as well. A White teacher related a story about one of her bilingual parents.

> I have noticed when I do the right things according to their culture then the parents are so much more open to me and the school and they just feel more comfortable. . . . [For example] both [of my Hispanic] children's parents came to open house and one had an interpreter with her, which really helped. And the other one did not, but in my feeble but broken Spanish I was at least able to tell her that I was glad Gloria was in the room and that we hope that she would be at school so she could learn English. It was all very broken—but I think that the mother understood that I was at least going to make an attempt to communicate with her how important it was and how glad I was Gloria was here.

By attempting to communicate with parents in their native language, teachers helped the parents feel at ease. Five other teachers agreed that as they understood parents' fears and apprehensions about schools, they learned to communicate more effectively. These teachers believed that their new attitude helped students and parents to be open and comfortable with the teacher and the school.

Student-Centered Classroom

In addition to creating positive and supportive learning environments, 62% of the teachers discussed in their post-CULTURES data how they shifted their curriculum to focus on students' interests. They connected classroom content to students' lives, creating more student-centered curriculum. For example, a teacher discussed how, when she encouraged her diverse students to share their own experiences in the classroom, she validated the students' cultures.

> I started including the Vietnamese students and labeling things. [For example], I taught Southeast Asia, that's one of the countries—Vietnam. And they did posters and things from their country and they brought in newspapers. And the ones that did speak English fairly well they did a little presentation and everything. And so, I guess when I started to include them and make them feel more a part of the class, the kids just responded to my actions.

Teachers also discussed their increased sensitivity to students' developmental learning needs and their ability to communicate content effectively to their students. One teacher shared her feelings and concerns regarding her teaching.

> I'm more sensitive to whether or not the children are thinking on the same level that I am or with my interpretation. Of course, I know I'm older and I've realized that probably some of the things they've probably never heard before cause they're only 11, 12 and 13. So being sensitive to other cultures in general has made me communicate better period.

By focusing on her students' needs, the teacher was able to foster more student-centered pedagogy and thus connect content to students' interests, backgrounds, and developmental needs. This is a crucial skill and approach to make learning more effective for all students.

Empathy and Antiracism

Despite the positive connections teachers made between their empathy and their practice, only 3 of the teachers focused on practices that addressed institutional or reconstructivist issues such as unequal school resources, issues of racism, tracking, and unfair discipline procedures. Most of the examples teachers provided spoke to their role in creating a more effective learning environment for their students.

In addition, though the CULTURES seminar had a strong emphasis on the African American child, in the post-CULTURES data teachers seemed to focus on their teaching of non–African American children. Most of their examples regarding the relationship of empathy to their practice revolved around children from cultures that were different from their own despite the emphasis in lectures and readings on African Americans and schooling. This may have occurred because they believed that the purpose of the course was to "make teachers

aware of different cultural backgrounds" (Irvine, 1998). Or perhaps it occurred because a majority of African American teachers, 21 of the 25, came to the seminar with little previous exposure to or experiences with different cultures. Exposure to different cultural communities, rather than their own, provoked the most reflection and thinking about their own beliefs and practice. Racial identity development models support such an experience. Interaction with someone who is racially or culturally different from one's self often leads to cognitive dissonance resulting in a shift in beliefs about that group (Bennett, 1993; Helms, 1990). The 7 White and 2 Latina teachers also did not address any institutional issues, but they mirrored many of the comments of their African American peers.

CONCLUSION

Teachers in this study agreed with researchers that empathy is a necessary, but not sufficient, trait for working with culturally diverse students. In this study, teachers noted the importance of empathy in helping them to become more effective teachers with all their students. In the post-CULTURES data, they believed that empathy was an implicit part of being a caring, supportive, and responsive teacher with their culturally diverse students. In regard to their practice, teachers reported that an empathetic disposition led to more positive interactions with their students, supportive classroom climates, and student-centered pedagogy. These are significant characteristics of culturally responsive teachers (Gay, 2000). These various qualities and practices, which the CULTURES teachers in this study related to their development of empathy, have been referred to by other researchers as "caring" (e.g., Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). As stated earlier, caring teachers usually have children who perform well academically, socially, morally, and culturally (Gay, 2000).

This study contributes to the existing research in multicultural teacher education by highlighting various strategies and contexts teacher educators can use in fostering empathy among their students and practicing teachers.

Though the teachers in this study self-selected to be a part of the CULTURES program and may have had a predisposition to cross-cultural empathy, they found various aspects of the program valuable. These strategies include offering opportunities for teachers to experience cross-cultural interactions, self-reflection, and learning in a supportive and challenging program structure. But it was also noted that the structure of the learning experiences must balance risk with support and scaffold immersions from most familiar to least. Thrusting teachers or preservice teachers into high-risk, challenging situations may foster more resistance rather than openness. Constructing learning experiences to manage the level of risk will provide enough support so that teachers are challenged but are not far beyond their comfort zones.

The results from this study highlight some of the implications of empathy in teachers' practice and the value of creating contexts in which teachers must use and nurture empathetic dispositions and behaviors. Teachers' beliefs about empathy and their resulting attitudes and behaviors point to the value of nurturing powerful beliefs, such as empathy, in teacher education programs. Educational data predict that preservice teachers will continue to be predominately White females who will most likely come from communities and experiences different from those of their future students (National Education Association, 1997). These data underscore the importance of designing teacher education programs that develop and nurture dispositions, like empathetic connections with culturally diverse populations, so that academic achievement may become a reality for *all* students.

REFERENCES

Allport, G. W. (1979). *The nature of prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Banks, J. (1994). *Multiethnic education: Theory and practice*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Bennett, M. (1993). Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp. 21-72). Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Cochran-Smith, M. (1995). Color blindness and basket making are not the answers: Confronting the dilemmas of

race, culture, and language diversity in teacher education. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*, 493-522.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). How teacher education matters. *Journal of Teacher Education, 51*, 166-173.

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: New Press.

Derman-Sparks, L., & Phillips, C. B. (1997). *Teaching/learning antiracism*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Foster, M. (1995). African American teachers and culturally relevant pedagogy. In J. Banks & C. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 570-581). New York: Macmillan.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research & practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Germain, M. H. (1998). *Worldly teachers: Cultural learning and pedagogy*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam.

Goodman, D. J. (2000). Motivating people from privileged groups to support social justice. *Teachers College Record, 102*, 1061-1085.

Gordon, G. (1999). Teacher talent and urban schools. *Phi Delta Kappan, 81*, 304-306.

Grant, C. (1991). *Educational research and teacher training for successfully teaching limited English proficient students*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED 349 833)

Gudykunst, W. B., & Hammer, M. R. (1983). Basic training design: Approaches to intercultural training. In D. Landis & R. Brislin (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training* (Vol. 1, pp. 118-154). New York: Pergamon.

Helms, J. E. (Ed.). (1990). *Black and White racial identity: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Greenwood.

Huberman, M. A., & Miles, M. B. (1994). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 428-444). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hughes-Weiner, G. (1986). The "learning how to learn" approach to cross-cultural orientation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 10*, 485-505.

Irvine, J. J. (1990). *Black students and school failure: Policies, practices, and prescriptions*. New York: Greenwood.

Irvine, J. J. (1993). *CULTURES project proposal*. Atlanta, GA: Emory University, Division of Educational Studies.

Irvine, J. J. (1998). *CULTURES project report*. Atlanta, GA: Emory University, Division of Educational Studies.

Kennedy, M. M. (1991). Some surprising findings on how teachers learn to teach. *Educational Leadership, 49*(3), 14-17.

Ladson-Billings. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lawrence, S. M., & Tatum, B. D. (1997). White educators as allies: Moving from awareness to action. In M. Fine, L.

Weiss, L. Powell, & M. Wong (Eds.), *Off White: Critical perspectives on race* (pp. 333-342). New York: Routledge.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (1989). *Designing qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

McAllister, G. (1999). Urban teachers' beliefs about culture and the relationship of those beliefs to their practice. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 60-05A*, 1428.

Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

National Education Association. (1997). *Status of the American public school teacher, 1995-1996*. Washington, DC: Author.

Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Oliner, P. M., & Oliner, S. P. (1995). *Toward a caring society: Ideas into action*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Paige, M. (1993). On the nature of intercultural experiences and intercultural education. In M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp. 1-20). Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Rosenberg, P. M. (1998). The presence of an absence: Issues of race in teacher education at a predominantly White college campus. In M. E. Dilworth (Ed.), *Being responsive to cultural differences: How teachers learn* (pp. 5-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sleeter, C. (1992). *Keepers of the American dream: A study of staff development and multicultural education*. Washington, DC: Falmer.

Spelman, E. V. (1995). Changing the subject: Studies in the appropriation of pain. In L. Bell & D. Blumenfeld (Eds.), *Overcoming racism and sexism* (pp. 181-196). London: Rowan & Littlefield.

Steward, R. J., Borgers, S. J. H., Chambers, T., & Brown, N. (1998). *Culture specific knowledge and the ability to empathize: Applications for cross-cultural counseling training*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED 419 184)

Yin, R. K. (1989). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Zeichner, K., & Melnick, S. (1995). *The role of community field experiences in preparing teachers for cultural diversity*. East Lansing, MI: National Center for Research on Teacher Learning.

Gretchen McAllister is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the Center for Excellence in Education at Northern Arizona University. Her research interests include multicultural teacher education, bilingual education, culturally responsive teaching, and the role of empathy in social studies.