LEARNING FROM OUR DIVERSE STUDENTS: HELPING TEACHERS RETHINK PROBLEMATIC TEACHING AND LEARNING SITUATIONS

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Abstract—This paper presents research on helping teachers to think more generatively about increasingly diverse student populations. An important premise of this paper is that any giant steps toward the improvement of instruction for linguistically and culturally diverse students, will, of necessity, include an examination and transformation of notions of ability and difference. Our research on “underprepared” students, most of whom are ethnic or linguistic minorities, had shown us the incipient excellence that often underlay the perceived errors in many students’ literacy performances. Presenting our data in the form of open-ended cases, would, we hoped, create occasions for teachers to make similar discoveries. Although the teachers’ conversations about the cases did not, in every instance, result in accounts of students’ literacy performances that to our way of thinking were productive, our data showed that teachers did engage in an inquiry mode with the materials as they jointly attempted to account for the literacy performances presented in each case. We view “learning cases” as part of an instructional sequence, a first step toward giving teachers practice in thinking in this problem-solving mode, for we recognize that the success of this kind of approach depends on building a community of reflective practitioners around the practice of presenting and diagnosing problem cases.

While “all children can learn” has become the latest mantra of teacher education, the evidence is that many teachers and prospective teachers continue to believe that not all children can learn the same things. G. Williamson McDiarmid (1990, p. 19)

There simply is no training program for teachers and can be no definite research study that will ever account for the realities our students bring with them. Change is constant. Each generation is different. Given the lack of homogeneity in our classes, given the incredible diversity of culture we are being exposed to, who better to learn from than our students? Terry Dean (1989, p. 36)

As we write this article, schools and teachers all over the world are confronting the challenge of diverse student populations. We believe that, if public education systems are ever to serve the needs of all, if they will ever be capable of honoring this diversity, of drawing upon the linguistic and cultural richness and resources of all their children, then, among other things, teacher education will need to change. It will need to change in part by focussing more on teachers’ mental lives — on the socio-cognitive
activities underlying teachers’ behaviors and the ways in which teachers’ thinking about multicultural issues can and should grow and develop. This paper takes one small step toward this broad agenda for reform: We present our initial research on helping teachers to think more generatively about an increasingly diverse student body. We precede the report of that project with a discussion of the changing demographics of classrooms in the U.S.A., and the disparity that those changes introduce between student and teacher populations, as well as why this disparity is cause for such concern, why it needs to be addressed in teacher education. We then review briefly some recent attempts to formulate approaches toward education that could be called “multicultural”, as well as recent research on teacher cognition and learning. And finally, we situate our own work within current movements to promote teacher inquiry and reflective practice. An important premise of this paper is that any giant steps toward the improvement of instruction for the disenfranchised, any serious and sustained efforts to prepare teachers to better serve the needs of all children, will of necessity include an examination and transformation of notions of ability and difference. We hope our research suggests some avenues for carrying out this kind of change by illustrating the learning that teachers might be encouraged to do about and from their students.

The Changing Demographics of U.S. Classrooms: Diversity and Disparity

All about us we can see the face of education change. In the 10 years from 1976 to 1986 European-American enrollment in U.S. public schools decreased by almost 13%. During the same decade, Hispanic-American enrollment grew by 44%, and Asian-Americans more than doubled (National Center for Education Statistics, 1989). By 1986, nearly one out of every three public school children was a “minority” student. Despite an exponential growth in diversity among students, our teaching population is becoming less diverse, the prototypical teaching candidate remaining white, middle class, and female (Balch, 1991). In the 10 years from 1971 to 1981, the percentage of European-American teachers in the U.S.A. rose from 88.3% to 91.6%, falling a bit to 89.6% by 1986 (NCES, 1989). In contrast, the percentage of African-American teachers dropped from 12% in 1970 to a predicted 5% in 1990 (National Education Association, 1988), while the percentage of other minority teachers also fell from 3.6% in 1971 to 3.4% in 1986 (NCES, 1989; see also the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1987a, b). Nor is there evidence that the disparity is lessening, for fewer minorities are entering the teaching profession. In California, for example, where over half of all students are ethnic, linguistic, or racial minorities, 81.6% of certificate holders are European-American (California State Department of Education, 1989). Balch (1991) reports that only 13.5% of all the California teaching credentials awarded in the 1986–1987 year went to minorities (see also AACTE, 1987a, b; NCES, 1989; NEA, 1989).

The increasing diversity of U.S. students and the increasing homogenization of this country’s teaching force means that more and more teachers and students will be less and less like each other in background, ethnicity, and interests. We see this disparity as cause for concern for many reasons. Most broadly, “the race and background of (children’s) teachers tells them something about authority and power in contemporary America” and “influence(s) children’s attitudes toward school, their academic accomplishments, and their views of their own and others’ intrinsic worth” (Carnegie Forum, 1986, p. 79). More particularly, a great deal of research

2 As the number of minority children in the U.S. increases, we are distressed to observe that the percentage of school children living in poverty increases as well. In 1987, 54.8% of all African-American children and 55% of all Hispanic-American children under the age of 18 lived in poverty, compared to 29.5% of all White children of the same age (NCES, 1989). Thus, new faces in our classrooms mirror not only the increasing linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity of North American society, but an increasing socio-economic disparity as well.

3 This is not to suggest, of course, that all European-American teachers share the same cultural background. As Banks (1993) points out, “There is enormous diversity among European Americans that is mirrored in the backgrounds of the teacher population, including diversity related to religion, social class, region, and ethnic origin” (p. 12). Banks also points out that this diversity is not often acknowledged in classrooms or by researchers.
has shown how cultural differences can result in poor communication and become the basis for misunderstandings and misperceptions (e.g., Heath, 1983; Gumperz, 1982). Cultural differences also fit hand in glove with lowered expectations of students’ abilities. Teachers can and do underestimate the skill, knowledge, and potential of diverse students because they (like many of us) have not learned to understand ways of communicating and thinking that differ from the mainstream (Haberman, 1991; Hull, Rose, Fraser, & Castellano, 1991; Paine, 1989). And because teachers tend to differentiate instruction on the basis of what they believe their students can do, they may carry out pedagogical decisions that result in differential treatment and reduced educational opportunities (McDiarmid, 1990; Paine, 1989). The over-representation of minority students and those with lower socio-economic status in remedial and vocational classes, their lower academic achievement, and their higher drop-out rates should come, then, as no surprise (cf., Cole & Griffin, 1987; Oakes, 1985).

Hilliard (1974) makes this point strongly in regard to African-Americans, viewing “bad teaching or oppressive teaching” as “less a matter of teacher’s deficit in commonly practiced teaching skills than a matter of reflection of a teacher’s fundamental negative feelings about or negative expectations for Black children” (p. 42). We believe that the vast majority of teachers come to teaching with the intent to do good by all children in their care and that most would deny holding fixed expectations for particular groups of students (cf., Gomez & Tabachnick, 1991; McDiarmid, 1990; Paine, 1989). Decreased opportunities for learning, the “oppressive teaching” to which Hilliard refers, seems to us more the result of teachers being unprepared for the diversity of the modern classroom than the product of deliberately prejudicial views. As Paine (1989) points out, when teachers enter the classroom they tend to draw on their own experiences in schooling, from which they derive normative interpretive frameworks, and to bring little personal experience of diversity into their pedagogical decision-making. They therefore tend to view diverse students “as varying in the degree to which they differ from the norm” and to understand difference as a problem rather than as a resource (Paine, 1989). Similarly, Gomez (1991) finds that young teachers tend to believe that “there is one preferred way of living for which all people should strive” and “fail to take into account that children of different cultural, language and economic backgrounds bring valuable as well as varied experiences to school” (p. 95).

Moving Toward Multicultural Education

Given the diverging demographics of teacher and student populations, deficit views of diverse students seem likely to increase and poor school experiences for minority populations to accelerate, unless teacher education can somehow provoke teachers to break with their own prior experience (cf., Buchmann, 1990; Gomez, 1991; Gomez & Grant, 1990). We hear a new urgency, then, in the call to prepare teachers for multicultural classrooms, a call that is now decades old and that has arisen from a multiplicity of voices advocating many and diverse goals. But no matter how multicultural education has been defined, a central goal has been to promote equity in educational outcomes across diverse populations of students (Baptiste, Baptise, & Gollnick, 1980; Grant & Sleeter, 1986; Trueba, 1989). Many ideas have been put forward as to how we might accomplish this goal; increasing the recruitment of minorities into the teaching profession (e.g., AACTE, 1987; CSDE, 1977); sensitizing teachers to better human relations with diverse students (e.g., Parsons & Tikunoff, 1975); providing diverse field placements for prospective teachers to give them enriched experiences of cultural diversity (e.g., Cazden and Mehian, 1989); expanding the curriculum to include and to honor a diversity of cultural perspectives (e.g., Baptiste et al., 1980; Grant & Sleeter, 1986) and different types of knowledge (Banks, 1993); tackling issues of diversity, prejudice, and equity directly in order to mobilize student energies for social change (e.g., Sleeter, 1991 and Grant, 1975) for a history of multicultural education and Sleeter and Grant (1988) for a review of different definitions of multicultural education.
Although these differing approaches are perhaps best considered as multiple fronts along which to move towards multicultural education, some seem more problematic than others. There has been concern in particular about attempts to educate teachers about specific cultures, objections that this approach may contribute to cultural stereotyping (Barnes, 1974; Cazden & Mehan, 1989; McDiarmid, 1990; McDiarmid & Price, 1990). As Collins (1975) warned over a decade ago, “too many attempts to create multicultural understanding have resulted in superficial exposure to customs and to famous persons of other races” (p. 206); worries about this tendency toward stereotyping still persist. McDiarmid and colleagues (McDiarmid, 1990; McDiarmid & Price, 1990), for example, voice this concern in light of their efforts to chronicle changes in prospective teachers’ beliefs about and attitudes toward diverse students. They studied the impact of the “Accepting Behaviors for Cultural Diversity” project in the state of Michigan, as well as the affects of multicultural workshops in the Los Angeles Unified School District, programs which featured an overview of the cultural traits of specific groups. They found that the programs had little impact on prospective teachers’ beliefs about and attitudes toward diverse students. They studied the impact of the “Accepting Behaviors for Cultural Diversity” project in the state of Michigan, as well as the affects of multicultural workshops in the Los Angeles Unified School District, programs which featured an overview of the cultural traits of specific groups. They found that the programs had little impact on prospective teachers’ beliefs about and attitudes toward diverse students. In fact, these researchers observe that “the presentation of information on ethnic and religious groups may actually encourage prospective teachers to generalize and, eventually, to pre-judge pupils in their classrooms” (McDiarmid & Price, 1990, p. 15).

Even if informing prospective teachers about the cultural characteristics of particular groups produced the kind of cultural sensitivity and respect for diversity that it is no doubt intended to promote, we do not believe this approach would sufficiently prepare teachers for the changing faces they will encounter in their classrooms, for waves of immigration continue to flow. The rapid rate of demographic change suggests, rather, that we would do well to reconceive teacher education, perhaps by looking for ways to foster in teachers and prospective teachers the inquiry skills common to ethnographers, linguists, sociologists, and cognitive scientists. Thereby teachers could themselves discover how best to approach the learning needs of their particular students (Cazden & Mehan, 1987; Heath & Branscombe, 1985; Heath & Mangiola, 1991). It may be that an ability to investigate students’ understandings will put teachers in the best position to promote equitable learning (cf., Gomez & Grant, 1990). We would add that such an enterprise would also need to be undergirded by an understanding of the ways in which teachers learn and develop as teaching professionals.

Teacher Cognition and Learning

What seems to be overlooked in most approaches to multiculturalism is the role that teachers’ beliefs play in the interpretation and assimilation of information. Only in the last decade has research begun to focus on teachers’ mental lives — the socio-cognitive activities underlying teachers behaviors, the ways that teachers learn and develop in the process of teaching (see Shulman, 1986, for a review of this recent history). Arising out of cognitive psychology, a new conceptualization has begun to drive research on teacher cognition: “Teachers are rational professionals who, like other professionals such as physicians, make judgments and carry out decisions in an uncertain, complex environment” (Shavelson, 1983, pp. 392–393). In their recent review of this research program, Clark and Peterson (1986) divided work on teacher cognition into three categories: studies

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3In the 4 years from 1986 to 1990, for example, limited English-speaking student groups grew at a staggering rate in California. Hmong speakers increased their numbers in the classroom by 105%, Spanish speakers by 59%, speakers of Farsi, Japanese, Cambodian, Lao, and Korean all increased by approximately 40% (CDSE, 1989). Over 137 different language, cultural and ethnic groups make up the diverse population of California (Walton, 1991). Meanwhile, bilingual teachers for the existing bilingual programs, which serve only a fraction of those language groups (Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese, and Philipino), fall 60% short of those needed (CDSE, 1989). Trying to keep teachers abreast of the cultural characteristics of all groups seems like a losing battle.
of teachers' planning, their thoughts and decision-making during teaching, and their theories and beliefs. The latter is the least developed area of research, and consequently, we do not know very much about how teachers understand student learning or the ways in which these understandings interact with what teachers know about their subject matter specialities and their theories of teaching and learning (Grossman, Wilson & Shulman, 1989; cf., Leinhardt, 1990). Despite this relative lack of research, it is clear that much turns on the "explicit and implicit theories (teachers) bring to bear in their work" (Shulman, 1986, p. 26).

Writing not from a cognitive science but from a practice-based notion of learning and development, Schön (1989) likewise conceives of teachers as problem-solving professionals who apply beliefs, theories, and knowledge to their work. He describes how the practical intelligence of teaching grows through a process of "experience, trial and error, intuition, and muddling through" as teacher confront complex "problematic situations" (p. 196). By encountering certain types of situations again and again, Schön argues, teachers build a repertoire of expectations, examples, images, and techniques. He further claims that teachers' knowledge is situated in the activities of teaching, becoming "increasingly tacit, spontaneous, and automatic" (p. 200). But having defined teachers' knowledge as embedded in intelligent action, in "know-how," Schön also recognizes that such knowledge can narrow teaching and reinforce error. "Specialization can lead into a parochial narrowness of vision," he writes, "or it can induce a kind of overlearning that takes the form of a tacit pattern of error to which the practitioner becomes selectively inattentive" (Schön, 1989, pp. 200–201). Teachers' knowledge then, is shaped (and potentially misshaped) by experience with teaching/learning interactions, experience which is filtered through the refracting lenses of teachers' beliefs and implicit theories. But narrowness of vision need not be permanent. Schön goes on to argue that "reflection can serve as a corrective to overlearning" as teachers "surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice" (p. 201).

Here, then, we find some directions for teacher education — an emerging model of teaching that characterizes teachers as problem-solving professionals and that situates teachers' knowledge in the contexts of their activity. This conceptualization suggests a methodology for teacher preparation that both expands the experiential base that teachers can draw upon, and that also engages them in active inquiry, problem-solving, and reflection about "problematic situations."

Promoting Teacher Inquiry and Reflective Practice

Seeing teachers as "builders of repertoire" rather than "accumulators of procedures and methods," Schön promotes storytelling as "the mode of description best suited to transformation in new situations of action" (Schön, 1988, p. 26). He is in good company: Witherell and Noddings (1991) describe narrative and dialogue as the mode of human thought most reasonant with the way we learn; Connelly and Clandinin (1990) define education and educational research as "the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories," viewing learners, teachers, and researchers as "storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories" (p. 2); McDiarmid and colleagues offer a pedagogy of teacher education that enables teachers to talk together about the kinds of problems they encounter and the various ways they might address these, seeing case studies as a vehicle for promoting these kinds of discussion (McDiarmid, 1990; McDiarmid & Price, 1990; see also Carter, 1993); and Gomez and Grant (1990) echo Coles' (1989) call to stories in exhorting teachers to "look at our students in multiple contexts," to "actively search for ways to understand . . . the lives they lead outside of schools," and to "welcome those lived experiences into our classrooms" (p. 36).

The important role that stories and narration can play in teacher education is perhaps most powerfully illustrated by the "case" movement. In recent years researchers and educators have adapted case methods from business and law education, creating a pedagogy for teacher education based on "teaching cases" (e.g., Shulman & Mesa-Bains, 1990). These cases typically consist of stories about teaching events which prompt teachers to look critically at their own teaching practices. Various focussed on cross-cultural interactions, subject-matter instruction,
student teaching, and mentoring, cases are often authored by teachers, then collected and edited for use by other teachers (e.g., Barnett, 1991; Kleinfeld, 1989; Shulman, 1992; Shulman & Colbert, 1987, 1988). While very little is known about how working with teaching cases impacts teachers’ beliefs and practice, research has begun to focus on teachers’ development within the context of writing and reflecting on their own and others’ stories (Bullough, 1991a, b; Kleinfeld, 1991; LaBoskey, 1991; Levin, 1993; Shulman, 1991a, b). Indeed, the considerable interest in a case approach to teacher education derives from the promise of this pedagogy for encouraging reflection through dialogue about problematic teaching situations (Morine-Dershimer, 1991).

We agree that the use of “teaching cases” seems quite a good way to encourage reflection. But because cases are usually authored by teachers, they most often focus just on the teachers’ perspective, when the perspective of the student enters the case, it is necessarily interpreted from a teacher’s point of view. We want to suggest that in order to promote reflection, not just on teaching but on teaching as it shapes and is shaped by learning, there needs to be access to students’ thinking processes and backgrounds in order to complete the description of problematic situation. In addition to “teaching cases,” then, we would like to see “learning cases” that focus on the ways in which students are interpreting classroom teaching; that bring students’ backgrounds, knowledge, and strategies to the fore; that help us to view classroom situations from a desk in the back row.

The approach to cases that we will argue for differs in yet another way from the usual conception and in so doing shares some similarities with Schön’s vision of reflective practice. Schön (1989, 1990) emphasizes the importance of teachers coming together to uncover the reason, the sense underlying student behavior. In fact, he defines reflective teaching as the ability to inquire into the reasonableness of student performance in the classroom, a facility he calls “giving the child reason”:

Teaching in the mode of “giving kids reason” involves listening to the things kids say, adopting a stance based on the assumption that what they say or do makes sense; attending to the surprising, puzzling things they do or say; discovering the sense that underlies their words and actions; fashioning descriptions or demonstrations of privileged (school) knowledge that meet their initial understandings; and creating situations that enable them to coordinate school knowledge with the knowing already built into their doing. (Schön, 1990, pp. 203–204)

“Giving a child reason” requires, not just storytelling, but story-finding; it means looking for the story the learner would tell if she could.

We too believe in “giving the child reason” our research has as its center the search for the history and logic that underlie problematic literacy performances — and we support as well the notion of “story-finding” in addition to “story-telling.” As we will report in some detail in the rest of this paper, we have begun to make available for teachers’ exploration and reflection what we think are rich sets of qualitative data on literacy teaching and learning. Collected as part of a project to “rethink” remedial literacy instruction for largely minority populations, these data include students’ writing, both final products and multiple drafts; formal and informal interviews with students about their reading and writing, their backgrounds and previous schooling, and their earlier experiences with literacy; notes on classroom observations; and transcriptions of classroom talk. We have written several articles about this research, attempting to tell the compelling stories that we saw in the

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6Two educational journals have devoted recent issues to the use of case methodology in teacher education (Journal of Teacher Education, 1991; Teacher Education Quarterly, 1990); and several recent conferences have been held on this topic (e.g., the 1991 Conference on Case Methods in Teacher Education sponsored by the Commonwealth Center for the Education of Teachers).

7This phrase arose in the context of the “Teacher Project,” an innovative inservice training program conducted by Jeanne Bamberger and Eleanor Duckworth. The teachers who participated in this program gathered and interpreted observations of children interacting with classroom teaching, taking the role of detectives endeavoring to solve the puzzle of a student’s unexpected behavior, and assuming that, despite their puzzlement, the behavior made sense, had reason.

8One approach to story-finding is the “case inquiry” LaBoskey requires of her student teachers when she assigns them the task of observing a particular student in multiple contexts and constructing a case study that summarizes their findings (LaBoskey, 1989). Gomez (1991) similarly asks her students to construct a case study of one child’s school performance in language arts. For a description of a case approach to assessment of student learning, see Carroll and Carini (1991).
data, constructing accounts of teaching and learning going awry as students made sense of classroom instruction in unexpected and/or unappreciated ways (Hull & Rose, 1989, 1990; Hull, Rose, Fraser, & Castellano, 1991).

But we have also wanted to find helpful ways to involve teachers in the research and in reflection. Rather than telling teachers the stories that we derived from the data, we decided to engage teachers and student teachers in active problem-solving, giving them practice in approaching student performances in the spirit of inquiry. Thus, using both print-based and computer-based materials (Hull, Rose, Greenleaf, & Reilly, 1991; Reilly, Hull, & Greenleaf, 1993), we have made our qualitative research data available to teachers and prospective teachers, and we have asked them to construct their own interpretations, to construct "learning cases," if you will. In so doing we have aimed to expand the experiential base of teachers and prospective teachers, giving them access to detailed information about individual students from diverse backgrounds as those students make sense of literacy teaching. We have hoped as well to engage teachers and prospective teachers in active problem-solving and decision-making, providing practice in taking the turn of mind that we hope will promote both excellence and equity in education. As Shulman (in press) points out, research has only begun to explore how case methods might work in teacher education (cf., Sykes & Bird, in press). Below we report some of our initial research on this process.

Description of the Case Materials

The best way to give a sense of the cases we have constructed is to quote directly from them. For brevity's sake, we will limit our discussion to one case throughout this section, a case we call "Maria." Here is the way it begins:

Below you'll find a transcript of part of a discussion that occurred in a remedial writing class; some background information on the class and one of the key students in that discussion, Maria; and portions of a later interview with the teacher as she viewed a videotape of the discussion. In your analysis of this transcript, you will be looking closely at the conversation the teacher had with her class and trying to characterize it in terms of its interactional patterns and the kinds of classroom discourse such patterns allow. More specifically, your task is:

1. to describe Maria's conversational patterns and how they differ from the patterns her teacher seems to prefer (for example, how does she gain the floor when she wants to talk? how does her teacher react to these initiations? how do Maria's conversational patterns influence her teacher's judgment of her cognitive abilities?);

2. to discuss the extent to which the kind of talk that is allowed in classrooms can influence the kind of learning that goes on;

3. to speculate about how beliefs about remediation and our students' abilities can influence teaching and learning.

The case then goes on to provide background on Maria and her remedial writing class at a state university. Participants learn that the teacher of the class was a recent and respected graduate of a long-standing teacher training program and the writing course is required of students depending on their scores on entrance tests. They learn that the lesson in question took place the fourth week of the semester and that it centered on a "pre-writing" exercise, a discussion to prepare students for an essay assignment on music videos and their appropriateness for viewers. And they learn about Maria: that her heritage is Spanish and Italian, that she was born in El Salvador and had moved to the U.S.A. when she was about 2 years old; that her first language is Spanish and that she had learned English in a bilingual program; that she claimed to enjoy writing and had even written a romance novel in high school; that she had won a scholarship to college on the basis of a speech contest; that she sat in the front row of her remedial writing class, never missed a session, and turned in all her homework on time.

The next portion of the case is a transcript of classroom talk from the pre-writing lesson; participants are encouraged to read it aloud. The transcript reveals a discussion which is predominantly teacher-led, and where the majority of the students in the class adhered to the unspoken rules for classroom discourse that were operating: students responded to teacher-initiated questions, sat quietly as the teacher gave "mini-lectures," and initiated few interactions themselves. However, Maria's patterns of interaction in the discussion stood out: She interjected comments and interrupted the teacher's mini-lectures, acting as though she were engaged in ordinary conversation instead of the patterned,
teacher-led discourse common to classrooms. Here is an example, which picks up in the middle of this discussion about what constitutes appropriate ratings for music videos:

Teacher: Yeah, all right. Very frightening, traumatic, kind of blood and gore. (Laughter from the class.) Okay, yeah. All right, yeah. And they, yeah, there's a problem with the accessibility of music videos on television right now, and that's really what we're going to be dealing with in this essay, is the issue of music videos that is being considered right now, and you're going to have a chance to...

Maria: [interrupting loudly] Oh.

Teacher: ...try to convince your audience of your position. Okay?

Maria: When I saw the first part of Thriller and that, that part when the first part about that corpse?

Teacher: Mmhmm.

Maria: And, and, he jumped up with blood and that was, I, I haven't seen a scene like that in a video before. (It was) scary. Very scary!

[Laughter]

Teacher: Yeah, I can tell just from the publicity which videos I'm gonna avoid just because of those kinds of scenes. Okay. Wh-, tell me a little about whether you think music videos that you have seen should be allowed on T.V. What kinds of things... um... should determine whether they can be on T.V.?

In later parts of the transcript the teacher ignored Maria's legitimate and helpful comments, cutting her short and changing the topic, and refusing to acknowledge her potentially insightful comments about issues of race and class. The third portion of the case was a transcript of an interview in which Maria's instructor labels her “the queen of the nonsequiturs,” expressing surprise that Maria's writing is not as “scattered” as her talking, as well as disdain about her novel-writing attempts. She also claims that Maria does not understand the difference between creative writing and expository prose. Lastly, the case provides an excerpt from an essay that Maria had written.

In our own research on Maria and her teacher and her remedial writing class (Hull et al., 1991); we struggled to understand how it was possible for a well intentioned and caring teacher to be so affected by a student's annoying conversational style that she used that style as a barometer by which to measure her student's intellectual ability (and this despite evidence that Maria wrote rather well). Our own explanation came from looking at the cultural context of school failure, and recognizing that for almost 200 years in the U.S.A. the dominant way to think about underachieving students has been to focus on defects in intellect or character or differences in culture or situation that lead to failure, and to locate the causes within the mind and language of the individual. We would argue that, along with the teacher in the case, most of us are primed by our histories and backgrounds and educations to speak of poorly performing students as deficient, and this is doubly so when those students are members of minority cultures. We did not, however, include our particular interpretation as part of the case, nor did we expect participants to produce it. Rather, we hoped that reflection on and discussion of the Maria case would result in explanations that admitted complexity and that avoided simplistic appeals to deficit notions, and that these more generative explanations would be accompanied by appropriate pedagogies. We also believed that, at the very least, this case and others like it would provide a window on how teachers think about difference, ability, and diversity.

Data Collection and Analysis

We have introduced the Maria case materials, along with two other cases, Robert and Tanya, to teacher-educators, teachers, tutors, and prospective teachers participating in five different kinds of teacher training or professionalization activities: a National Writing Project seminar, a Writing Project-based teacher-researcher group, a national workshop on multicultural education, a teacher education program in secondary English, and a university tutor-training program. In each setting, participating teachers were given a set of data about an individual student's reading, writing, or classroom participation and were asked to read the materials and

*The National Writing Project is a network of expert writing teachers with its hub at the University of California, Berkeley.*
account for the student’s performance in their group. The data sets thus represented an open-ended, instructional problem for teachers to solve in concert with their peers.

We audio-recorded (and on one occasion video-recorded) the responses of 36 participants as they worked in 10 different groups to discuss the cases. We then transcribed these audio recordings for data analysis. In addition, we collected the written conclusions drawn by these 10 groups, as well as other, non-recorded groups, at the end of each problem-solving session. Transcripts of the verbal responses of the 36 teachers, tutors, and prospective teachers to the case materials, as well as the summaries given by non-recorded groups, were analyzed. We were most interested in the kinds of interpretations participants constructed for the student behaviors and performances they encountered in the data sets. Thus, we scanned transcripts and summaries for (1) the accounts given for the problematic interaction described in the case; and (2) the pedagogy designed on the basis of these accounts.

The accounts which arose in the different groups were compared and categorized inductively into a typology of account types. Because we were interested in the entire spectrum of reactions these case materials might provoke, analysis of the transcripts focused on all of the accounts offered during a problem-solving session, including, but not limited to the interpretations of the case data that groups ultimately settled upon. In the section which follows, we use the types of interpretations given by participants to illustrate the problems and promise of using case data on diverse populations and problematic school performance in teacher education. After describing the taxonomy of account types which emerged from the corpus of data, we limit our illustration and discussion to the different accounts given of the Maria case.

Findings

Accounting for Unexpected Student Performance

As we analyzed the responses to our case materials, we were persuaded that providing puzzling or problematic student performances in the form of case data for teachers to interpret is one way to help prepare teachers to meet the multicultural student population of the modern classroom. Primary among our findings is that teachers did engage in an inquiry mode with these materials, trying to account for the student performance presented in each case. Importantly, engaging in this type of group inquiry process seemed to encourage reflective and critical thinking that may allow teachers to rethink their expectations of diverse students. However, not all of the accounts given were generous to students. Rather, they differed in the degree to which they located the problem in the case in the student, the teacher, the task, or the instructional context. Also, some accounts were more optimistic than others in that they suggested a positive role for classroom instruction.

Figure 1 describes the types of accounts that teachers and prospective teachers offered for the data presented in the case materials. These categories are not meant to be mutually exclusive. Rather, we recognize that explanation types interact. A task might be confusing because of gaps in the student’s background and/or because the teacher has not done an adequate job of preparing a student for the task. The way student perspectives and representations of tasks differ from those of the teacher may be closely related to their cultural differences as well. And clearly the strategies students bring to academic tasks are very much dependent on their particular configurations of knowledge and experience.

What defines a particular account as an instance of one category or the other, then, is the way the account is framed in the problem-solving protocol. For instance, the problematic discussion in the Maria case was explained in these ways (among many others): (1) Maria and her teacher have different scripts for school; (2) Maria hasn’t thought through what she wants to say before speaking; and (3) Maria is trying to respond in the dark to the teacher, who has specific, yet hidden, responses in mind. These distinct framings of the problem correspond respectively to the following categories: (1) differences in student and teacher perceptions of the task; (2) unproductive or unexpected strategies; and (3) inadequate or ineffective teaching.

The categories of account types, the varying ways that teachers frame their accounts, do differ importantly from one another. One significant difference among account types concerns where the locus of responsibility for the unexpected
The student has gaps in background knowledge or experience
Ex.: The student hasn’t learned to summarize in writing. She doesn’t understand what the expectations are for a summary.

The student’s perception of the task differs from that of the teacher
Ex.: Both the student and her teacher play “school scripts” but their scripts have different sets of rules.

The knowledge and experience (perspective) that the student brings to the task differs from that of the teacher
Ex.: The student talks about her feelings, which isn’t expected or accepted in school. The teacher has no emotional commitment to the discussion, so she experiences the student’s emotion-laden talk as inappropriate.

The student applies unexpected or unproductive strategies to the task
Ex.: The student is thinking out loud in the class discussion; for her, talk is a form of prewriting. She may be the kind of person who struggles to work out ideas verbally.

The task is confusing or ill-conceived or creating particular difficulties for the student
Ex.: Leading an effective classroom discussion is a very difficult task for the teacher, and participating in such a task is also difficult.

The teacher is doing a poor job
Ex.: The teacher is trying to direct the conversation in a particular way. She’s stifling the students, cutting students off, intolerant of what the students say, and not paying attention to the students.

The student has deficits in skills and/or abilities
Ex.: The student’s oral communication needs improvement. She dominates the discussion but at the same time is incoherent.

The student has flaws in character or background
Ex.: The student is from El Salvador, probably from a wealthy family. She’s probably been tutored all her life and is used to being pampered.

Figure 1. Types of accounts for problematic student performance on literary tasks

performance is placed: on the student (gaps in background knowledge, unproductive strategies, deficits in skills, flaws in character); on the teacher; on the task the student has been asked to perform; or shared among the teacher and student, who differ in their cultural perspectives or perceptions of the task. More importantly for our purposes, account types differ in the degree to which the problem so identified is permeable to instruction, in its degree of perceived permanence. Gaps in background knowledge or experience, for example, yield more easily to instruction that deficits ascribed to the student, particularly when these deficits are framed in terms of the student’s capacity to learn. Perceived flaws in students’ character or background are understood to be nearly fixed aspects of the student’s personality. If we are to promote
a problem-solving approach to teaching, one that views student performance on tasks as evidence of student development, both the degree to which instruction can address the problem and the locus of responsibility for the problem are critical factors in its formulation.

From this taxonomy of account types, we hypothesize that some accounts will be more productive than others in that they will generate more promising pedagogies. Specifically, accounts that focus on teachers' and students' different perspectives and perceptions, that reveal gaps in student knowledge, that discover students' unexpected or unproductive strategies, that recognize the ambiguities in academic tasks, and that reflect on teaching and how it may contribute to student difficulties, can be expected to lead to thoughtful approaches to teaching and learning, particularly when teachers have the opportunity to construct these accounts in the process of inquiry and problem-solving. Accounts based on student deficits or character flaws are not likely to generate pedagogical problem-solving, since teachers constructing these accounts may believe the deficits and flaws to be outside their influence and control. Rather, these deficit orientations will likely lead to watered-down curricula composed of simple tasks since they generate low expectations for student achievement and learning.

**Accounting for a Problematic Classroom Discussion**

Three problem-solving groups, totalling nine participants, were tape-recorded as they discussed the Maria case study. Table 1 summarizes the context and composition of each group.

The data also include written summaries from two additional, non-recorded group sessions which took place during a National Writing Project Seminar. Specific accounts participating groups of teachers generated for the troubled discussion transcribed in the Maria case study are excerpted in Appendix A. Figure 2 displays the numbers of times accounts given in the groups fell into the seven different categories of account types for each of these groups.  

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10 The numbers represent the times, measured by turns at talk during group discussions, in which accounts of specific types were offered, for the three recorded and transcribed groups. For the non-recorded groups, the numbers represent the times, as measured by the number of written propositions in the summaries, in which accounts are offered which fall into the specific categories.
ways that Maria's behavior was sensible and had a logical history. Only seven of the accounts attributed unexpected student performance to character flaws or deficits in skills or abilities. Indeed, the bulk (75) of the accounts given for Maria's interaction in the class center on the teacher's role in producing a confusing learning environment and critique the teacher's handling of the classroom discussion. However, a few of the explanations did seem counterproductive, in that they attributed deficits to the student or the student's background in such a way as to remove responsibility for the student's learning from the teacher. Most grievous among these were the characterization of Maria as a dominating and demanding child from a wealthy Latin family who expected an unreasonable amount of personal attention in class. We will return to these problematic accounts as we explore the group problem solving in more detail in the pages that follow. In particular, we will consider how interaction with the case data promoted reflective thinking about common instructional practices, about power and authority operating in the classroom, and about the potential significance of cultural differences and diversity.

**Critical Thinking About Common Instructional Practices**

For many of the teachers we observed, the materials seemed to promote critical consideration of teaching practices and reflection on their own teaching as they analyzed the logic and traced the history underlying the student's problematic classroom performance. All of the groups found the classroom discussion in the case troubling. They saw that students were not able to share their ideas freely but instead were required to fit their responses into the framework the teacher was building for the conversation. They spoke of the "teacher's agenda," and saw the teacher "stifling" and "ignoring," "not really listening" to students. The group of middle school teachers (Group 1) was inclined to see Maria as a behavior problem, much as she was characterized by her teacher. Even so, they were nonetheless led by the case to consider the structure of the interaction and its impact on Maria:

Rita: Well this is an interesting question. "What kind of talk did the teacher seem to prefer?"
I think the teacher preferred Andrea's very
simple, “That’s why we need to create another rating system.” She gets into that reply.
Jon: Uh-huh.
Pam: Yeah.
Rita: And, when the teacher asks... there’s another one that Andrea did. Oh, the teacher said, “What kinds of things should determine whether they can be on TV?” and Andrea says, “Language.”
Jon: Um-hmm.
Pam: Okay, did you feel like this whole lesson, though, was one of those that I abhor which is, the teacher has something in her mind and the other—
Rita: She has the answer and the kids don’t.
Pam: Yeah.

Another group of teachers (Group 3), among the most critical of how Maria’s teacher handled the discussion, nevertheless offered the sympathetic observation, “Leading an effective classroom discussion is very difficult.” These teachers recognized their own difficulties in leading classroom discussions, seeing themselves in the interaction between Maria and her teacher. They expressed frustration with the constraints of time and the demands of curricula that pressure teachers to “get on with it” and make open discussion “a luxury teachers feel they cannot afford.”

Critical Thinking About Power and Authority in the Classroom

Like the teachers who recognized that the press of time and the demands of the curricula make open discussion in the classroom difficult, for teachers in four of the five groups, the cases promoted reflection on the context of education. These reflections sometimes turned on the hierarchies of power and authority operating in the classroom. Many groups observed that teachers not only hold the power to define the truth in their classrooms, but to judge the abilities of their students. The group of preservice students (Group 2) explored the power and reach of teachers’ expectations, observing,

Given the way Maria addressed certain issues in class, her verbal patterns, the teacher let that influence how she looked at her language [in general]. Because when [the teacher] talks about [Maria’s] writing she was so critical and her writing is good, you know. Just looking at [the teacher’s] comments, you would not have known that the writing was so good.

Teacher educators (Group 3) recognized that “you’re going to make certain judgements and that’s human” but that given “human fallability,” students need to be protected from the pervasive impact of teachers’ expectations. In their own practice, these teachers had adopted the procedure of having students turn in papers without identifying themselves so that they could read without being influenced by their prejudices. The group of preservice teachers followed their discussion of the Maria case with general critical reflection on remediation and a more pointed discussion of stereotypes and prejudice as they emerge in pedagogy:

Mike: It’s so hard not to stereotype your students, I think. Especially in a remedial class.
Bev: Well that’s why I wanted to look at this case because I know when I was teaching at the state college for three quarters, you know, you sit in the room with the instructors and you hear all this talk about what morons these people are. You know, and I would sit there and I would think, well, just because they’re deficient in English it doesn’t mean that they’re deficient in the other parts of their life. This one young man, he wrote this paper which they sat and made fun of, and he was saying how when he was in high school he got A’s in trigonometry, you know. And they were laughing about that. “Well yeah, he got A’s in trigonometry but look at this essay.” And I thought, “This is a plea for help.” I mean, when someone thinks you are a moron, you know it. You can feel it.
Judy: And he’s saying, “Look, I got A’s in trigonometry. I’m not stupid, you know. Just because I don’t know this does not mean that I don’t know other things.” That was just the whole deal. You know you are a fool. It would be interesting to hear another professor or teacher of Maria’s who didn’t think of her as a remedial student, to see what he or she would have to say about Maria’s performance in class and things like that. How much of it is thinking that the kid is remedial that makes them?

These student teachers disagreed with Maria’s teacher and her low assessment of Maria, which led to a wholehearted critique of remediation as it is commonly understood and practiced. Going from the case of Maria to their own experience as student teachers, they echoed the many voices they had heard underestimate the abilities of students, at the same time speaking forcefully against those voices:
Bev: You know, it's just like every time you open your mouth, "No, that's wrong." They don't want to hear it. It's like their minds are almost closed, and the thought of freedom of thought in your opinion.

Mike: All the teachers at my school who teach remedial, I mean they're all having these conversations like, "You know, I can't find a book for these kids to read." They just bring them a little, short, you know. "They can't read that. Have you seen the vocabulary in that?"

Judy: I know. I read it when I was in school, and these kids can read it. But we get a lot of flack for that.

Bev: I know one time in our teaching class I suggested that, um, we were working with cliches, and I said it would be really neat to take the cliches and then have the students work in groups and have them write a story from the cliches. "They can't — that's beyond their grasp. You really think they can grasp that?" They've just got to have a brain!

Mike: I keep hearing from remedial teachers, "Well, you know, I know about respecting their ability to learn, but we have to be realistic, you know, in teaching these kids. You can talk philosophically if you want about what these kids can and can't do, but we have to be realistic."

Judy: What about, "These kids need more structure?" That's my absolute nightmare, the worst. I find if anything, it's the structure that's keeping them from being able to express the things that they know they have to say.

To be sure, the voices that conjured up limiting views of students were not always external to the groups of teachers exploring the cases. These groups could themselves invoke images of students centered on incapacities. We do not wish to make light of the stereotypes and low expectations that emerged in these discussions and in the pedagogy teachers sometimes imagined for the students. Indeed, we believe that these orientations, voiced or unvoiced, create the conditions for academic failure, as teachers aim too low to contribute to the development of their students, as students begin to think of themselves as unsuccessful, and as both withdraw from the enterprise of teaching and learning. Yet there are ways in which their emergence in this context was fortuitous. We are persuaded by some of the teacher educators who explored these cases to celebrate the uncovering of these tendencies, for, as they reminded us:

... they'll say, 'Oh, I don't believe in the deficient model' and 'I don't believe they're deficient' but they don't understand that the way they are interacting with the student might somehow assume and promote it.

When teachers' deficit views of students emerge in the context of an inservice or preservice program, they become available for reflection. It is precisely when these views are tacit and buried in every day practice that they are most intractable.

Critical Thinking About the Potential Impact of Cultural Diversity

In every group, we found that teachers considered the potential impact of cultural difference and a diversity of perspectives as they reasoned through the cases. The implications of differences in culture, background, experiences, and perspectives between teachers and students frequently entered the discussion. Teachers in three of the five groups stated their appreciation of the writing assignment given to Maria's class because it aimed to draw on students' knowledge, experience, and interest. Moreover, they saw that it offered students the opportunity to take the stance of an authority, to be experts on the topic of music videos. Precisely because the topic seemed to open up for the classroom to the students' external lives, these teachers were disappointed by the prewriting discussion. They saw the teacher "defeating her purposes" by not really listening to what the students were bringing to the discussion, by being intolerant of their responses, by driving forward an agenda that ignored students' experiences. Two groups suspected that Maria somehow unsettled her teacher, perhaps because she became so emotionally involved in the topic. They described the teacher as having "no tolerance for the fact that this woman is actually upset about the video," hypothesizing that the teacher found emotional displays inappropriate in the classroom.

Different perceptions of appropriateness, as they emerged in talk about the Maria case, touched on deeper cultural issues. Was Maria's teacher uncomfortable talking about political and social issues like class and race, trying to avoid these topics when Maria raised them? Was Maria uncomfortable talking about sex, becoming inarticulate as she tried to participate in the discussion because of the sensitivity of the
Learning From our Diverse Students

In a teacher-research group, one pair of middle-school teachers argued:

Jon: Culturally, is Maria ever gonna be comfortable with the sexual aspect? Should she be given an alternate writing topic?

Pam: Oh heck, I think she ought to at least be given a chance to participate in the discussion on something she’s thought about. I mean, you can’t protect all the kids. This may be a discussion that she is always gonna feel uncomfortable about.

In the same group, a perplexed teacher asked,

Rita: Don’t you usually see that kids can express themselves verbally much more fluently and coherently than they can on paper? So how do you account for Maria’s having the opposite? Being less coherent when she’s talking that she is when she’s writing?

Jon answered that Maria’s home language was Spanish — “her parents don’t speak English at home” — to explain why her teacher believed that she wrote “fairly well” but was the “queen of the nonsequitors” in class discussion. The student teachers in Group 2 noticed that the teacher responded differently to Maria than she did to other students in the class. Why did Maria unsettle the teacher? Because she was an assertive female? Because she was Hispanic? While these teachers were willing to ascribe prejudice to Maria’s teacher, other groups believed that Maria and her teacher were operating under different sets of rules, different “scripts for school.”

Although the group of middle-school teachers showed sensitivity to the ways different writing topics might affect students from diverse cultures, and considered how Maria’s Spanish language background might affect her oral fluency, they easily accepted the stereotype of the wealthy Central American, making it natural to blame Maria for the problematic class discussion (just as her teacher had). Jon’s assertion that Maria is “probably wealthy enough to be in private tutoring” since she is from El Salvador goes unquestioned by his group members. He characterizes Maria as “sitting in front of the class, wanting to participate, and cutting off other people,” setting up the view of Maria that persists in this group — as a behavior problem. The focus of the group is on solving the problem of Maria’s dominating behavior, and it isn’t until the end of the group session that the case materials themselves introduce another possibility — that the “kinds of questions the teacher seems to prefer” indicate that “she has the answer the kids don’t.” We hypothesize that, oftentimes, cultural stereotypes seem to have an authority and reality that is inarguable, and easily hold sway over groups that are unaware of the tendency toward stereotype.

Summary and Conclusions

“Something life-affirming in diversity must be discovered and rediscovered,” writes Greene (1993), “as what is held in common becomes always more many-faceted — open and inclusive, drawn to untapped possibility” (p. 17). In constructing cases for teacher inquiry, we have looked for ways to affirm diversity. Our research on underprepared students, most of whom are ethnic or linguistic minorities, had shown us the incipient excellence that often underlay the perceived errors in many students’ literacy performances. Presenting our data in the form of open-ended cases would, we hoped, create occasions for teachers to make similar discoveries. We wanted our materials to foreground particular teaching and learning situations as arenas where the perspectives and understandings of the teacher interact with the often different perspectives and understandings of individual learners. We hoped that materials, used in concert with group inquiry, would expand the experiential base of teachers providing access to information about individual students they normally would not have, and engage teachers in problem-solving, giving them practice in approaching student performances in an inquiry mode.

Our data showed that teachers did engage in an inquiry mode with the materials as they jointly attempted to account for the literacy performances presented in each case. In so doing, many teachers reflected critically on common instructional practices, on power and authority in the classroom, and on the potential significance of cultural difference and diversity. Such conversations, we believe, are one avenue toward helping educators examine and perhaps rethink their expectations of diverse students. However, the conversations which surrounded the cases did not, in every instance, result in accounts of students’ literacy performances that to our way of thinking were productive. That is, some par-
Participants did not adhere to the evidence in the case as they accounted for student performance, but at times invoked stereotypes and constructed explanations based on familiar and long-standing deficit notions of ability and difference. Such responses are a local reminder of the very great national challenge that faces U.S. educational institutions in learning to affirm plurality and difference, a challenge that is now regularly explored and debated in the social science literature (e.g., Bank, 1993; Greene, 1993).

The unproductive responses are also a reminder of the little-understood complexity of teaching through cases. Rather than informing teachers of our own interpretations of our qualitative research data, we made those data available to teachers so that they could construct their own interpretations—tell their own stories from the data, if you will. But as Carter (1993) points out, “it is important to remember that stories, because of their multiplicity of meanings and resistance to interpretation, teach in ambiguous ways.” (p. 10). Whether tightly constructed and interpreted or more open-ended, as were our materials, cases can allow multiple interpretations, and these may be more or less generative. As Carter points out, “We have a great deal to learn about the interpretive space within which story can become teacher-education pedagogy” (p. 10). This is doubly true, we would add, when cases deal with issues of difference, diversity, and ability.

Among the participants in our studies, the most common unproductive frames of reference that seemed to get in the way of granting the logic and reasonableness of student thinking were (1) a belief in right answers and right methods rather than exploratory thinking and flexibility and (2) a belief that cultural or linguistic diversity raises obstacles to learning. If looking carefully at a particular student’s performance allows such beliefs to surface, they can be rendered problematic and dealt with directly through targetted readings, reflective writing, and further discussions, especially in the context of a larger instructional program or inservice project. We believe, then, that such case materials can function not only as activities to expand the knowledge base of teachers and give them practice inquiring into the basis of student performances, but can also function as probes and windows into teachers’ beliefs. The beliefs that surface in these discussions can then become the basis for further reflection and inquiry.

We studied teachers’ interpretations of troubling learning situations as they emerged in a group context. Working in small groups, teachers often encountered alternative accounts for the student performance presented in the case which they must consider, adopt, or reject. We found that this can push them into deeper thinking and inquiry into the case, looking for evidence and counterevidence for their claims. We noticed that working in the company of other teachers can hold in check unwarranted explanations for student performance. Yet we also found that group dynamics can work to the detriment of the student. (For example, in the group of middle teachers, Jon took the lead in the group discussion. His initial characterization of Maria as an overindulged, wealthy student shapes the rest of the group discussion in troubling ways.) By analyzing transcripts of group discussions, we saw the ways that teachers working together could both challenge and reinforce harmful views of students. We saw how group dynamics, including leadership styles and established hierarchies of power and authority could influence the problem-solving process. We recognize, then, the complexity that group work raises for the interpretation of case study data, and see that here is an area requiring further study.

We do not, let us make clear, envision materials such as our cases as a singular approach that will be a panacea to the problem of honoring diversity in schooling. Quite the contrary, we recognize the importance of the programatic context in which they may serve a role. We would need to consider, for example, what other materials and activities might surround these cases. Reading materials might constrain interpretations a great deal and in useful ways, giving prospective teachers the knowledge to apply in the case situations. For example, the distinction between “exploratory” and “presentational” discourse drawn by Barnes (1986) as well as a discussion of IRE (Initiation-Response-Evaluation) discourse (Cazden, 1988), might be good accompaniments to the Maria case.

We imagine “learning cases” as part of an instructional sequence, a first step toward giving teachers practice in thinking in this problem-solving mode. Next in the sequence might be
gathering data to construct a case study of a student that teachers are not themselves teaching, leading ultimately to the construction of a case study of a child they are teaching. Ultimately, the success of this kind of approach depends on building a community of reflective practitioners around the practice of presenting and diagnosing problem cases. We are encouraged that recent attempts to recognize teaching as a profession foster a variety of activities associated with inquiry and reflection, such as the teacher research movement, new forms of assessment that make available the voices and perspectives of students, and the notion of teacher-to-teacher exchange through networks and inservice programs. All of these movements and practices, however, depend upon reconceiving and restructuring the school day so that teachers have time and support for reflection and inquiry. As the redefinition of teaching and the reorganization of schooling take place, we expect the interpretation of case data to be a valuable part of both teacher preparation and the new reflective culture of the school.

References


Appendix
Accounting for Maria’s Interaction in Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of account</th>
<th>Specific accounts offered</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differing perception of discussion</td>
<td>The teacher is constrained by time and the demands of her program to get on with the class discussion and hit on the most important ideas. M.’s attempts at a more open discussion are perceived by the teacher as barriers to this goal. Both M. and her teacher play “school scripts,” but their scripts have different sets of rules. M. and the teacher have two different agendas and M.’s gets squelched. M.’s “conversation” is really only response to the teacher’s questions. The teacher is “fishing” for something in particular.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differing (cultural) perspective</td>
<td>M. talks about her feelings, which is not expected or accepted in school. The teacher has no emotional commitment to the discussion, but M. does. The teacher experiences M.’s emotion-laden talk as inappropriate. M. is truly upset about scary videos and is emotionally involved in the issue. M. is uncomfortably with the topic of sex and cannot quite speak openly about it. Her hesitations and circumlocutions are the result. Perhaps M.’s Spanish language background is a factor in how she participates in the discussion. Spanish is the language spoken in her home and her parents do not speak English very well. M. may be less skilled speaking than she is writing English. Something about M. upsets the teacher because when she deals with other students the interaction goes fine but when she talks to M., she sounds incoherent. Maybe the teacher does not want to talk about blood and gore. Perhaps the teacher responds differently to M. than she does to other students because M. is Hispanic and/or female. The teacher is unwilling to consider the particularly “critical” issues like class differences, race, etc., that M. brings up in the discussion. The teacher has really misunderstood what M. is talking about.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unexpected or unproductive strategies</td>
<td>M. is having difficulty expressing herself because she has not thought through what she wants to say. Opening up a topic like this for discussion when students have not had time to think unjustly rewards the quick thinkers. Somebody like M. who needs some time to focus her thoughts is clearly at a disadvantage. M. is thinking out loud in the class discussion, and not particularly clearly. For M., this is a form of prewriting. M. may be the kind of person who struggles to work ideas out verbally. M. is trying to read the teacher’s mind. She’s coming up with examples of things, looking for the right answer, offering everything she can think of. The teacher wants to fill these kids’ comments into what she has to say. M. has a problem filling in the teacher’s blanks, but she does not necessarily have trouble writing. M. is trying to throw something out to see what the teacher’s response will be. She seems to be doing a valiant thing, trying to find out where the teacher is going, throwing in everything she can think of: sex, violence, race, political issues, scariness. There is a gap between M.’s writing and speaking skills. When M. is writing, she has a chance to think things through, but when the teacher brings up this discussion, there is no time to think. The teacher is trying to shut M. out of the discussion in order to get other students involved. M. is not allowing that to happen. M.’s domination of the discussion irritates the teacher, which will lead to a self-fulfilling prophesy since the teacher’s negative reaction to M. will cause her to become insecure and less coherent and more needy of attention in class.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confusing or difficult task</td>
<td>Leading an effective classroom discussion is a very difficult task for a teacher, and participating in such a discussion is also difficult.</td>
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<td>Inadequate or ineffective teaching</td>
<td>The teacher has good intentions, choosing topics that fit students’ interests and lives, but she shows little real interest in their experiences. She praises student contributions to the discussion only when they fit into her agenda. She’s defeating her purposes by trying to entertain conversation but then not allowing authentic discussion to emerge.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type of account</td>
<td>Specific accounts offered</td>
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<tr>
<td>The topic for discussion could be an opportunity for students to be authorities, but the teacher shows no faith in their knowledge and does not effectively elicit what they know. The teacher seemed to prefer simple answers and one word responses in the discussion. The lesson was one in which the teacher had something in her mind and the kids did not. The teacher has the “answer” she is looking for. The teacher has an agenda she wants to get through and so does not deal with what M. brings to the discussion. When M. starts talking about something, if it is not what the teacher wants to hear, she interrupts and moves on, ignoring M. The teacher is looking for the right answers rather than listening to what the students have to say. The teacher is trying to direct the conversation in a certain way. She’s stifling some of the students, cutting M. off, intolerant of what M. is saying, not paying attention to M. The teacher is not focused. It is not clear from the discussion what the teacher has in mind. She is not giving any indication of what students should be looking for, but obviously has something particular in mind. The teacher has a limited repertoire of responses to students. She talks disfluently in the discussion herself. The teacher is trying to get other students involved in the discussion by sidestepping M.’s responses. She needs some effective “put downs” to use with students who are dominating the discussion. She dismissed M.’s many comments but did not directly deal with the many interruptions. The teacher does not really know the topic and is involved in something about which she knows very little. She cannot hold a real conversation about the topic because of this. The teacher’s expectations of M., based on M.’s performance in class, color her reactions to M.’s writing. She underestimates M.’s cognitive abilities based on her perception of M.’s talk in class. She has low expectations for M. and does not like her so it surprises her that M. is able to do anything well. The teacher focuses on what her students are lacking, not on what they do well. She does not recognize M.’s achievement in writing a novel. Instead, she makes light of it. How much does thinking that the kid is remedial make them so? The teacher only thinks about what M. cannot do and discounts what M. may be able to do. The teacher is operating with the belief that she needs to structure things for the students, that they need more structure rather than more freedom of expression. M. has been judged remedial by something other than her writing. The teacher feels that M. is just off-track and flighty and uses her talk in class to judge her. She seems to be making fun of M.’s ideas, ignoring and discounting her. The teacher misunderstands M. and has obviously judged her. She does not give her much credit. The teacher sounds relatively new. The teacher does not look at the writing as being any kind of indicator of M.’s abilities. It surprises the teacher that her writing is good. Observing the class changes the way things normally go. The teacher is passing off a class discussion that did not go well as M.’s fault. She covering up, now that she’s been observed leading a less-than-ideal class discussion.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>M.’s oral communication needs improvement. She dominates the discussion but at the same time is incoherent, saying nothing. She cuts off other students but is not contributing anything.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>M. is trying to dominate the discussion. M. is from El Salvador, probably from a wealthy family. She has probably been tutored all her life and is used to being coddled and pampered.</td>
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