IT'S THERE: Talk About It

Race and poverty don't need to be the elephants in the classroom. As culturally responsive teaching takes root, these issues can actually help your students learn.

BY CYNTHIA KOPKOWSKI

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS AN ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM IN MONA MENDOZA'S CLASSROOM.

"How many consider this ghetto?" she asks her middle school students in response to the reading passage they're working through, which focuses on a girl being slighted at a party because she is Latina and low-income. More than three-quarters of Mendoza's students at Meany Middle School in Seattle are ethnic minorities. She follows her initial question with, "Give me some examples of behavior that seems ghetto." Her students, who had been following along with the assignment quietly, snap to attention. Suddenly, almost everyone has something to say. Discussion quickly turns to stereotypes and how many of them had experienced racism or been slighted for being poor.

Talking with students about sometimes painful personal experiences connected to their race or economic standing did not come easy. But as the head of the school's diversity committee, a veteran teacher, and a minority, Mendoza's more comfortable than most treading this potentially rocky path. She believes connecting with students' personal backgrounds—a method known as culturally responsive teaching—is the key to closing achievement gaps at a school where the student body is 84 percent Black, Asian American, Hispanic, or American Indian, and 65 percent are poor.

Down the hall though, what is math teacher Wendy Miller to do? Can a White, middle-class teacher raised in a White, middle-class suburb, talk about race without being labeled a racist? Can she talk about the realities of the poverty in which many of her students live without being accused of being elitist? More to the point, why would she even want to risk it?

Teachers sometimes "feel that to bring up race makes them a racist. Race has become a four-letter word in schools."

—JACQUELINE JORDAN IRVINE
EDUCATION RESEARCHER

Born and raised in Orange County, California, and the San Francisco Bay area, the 35-year-old teacher grew up attending schools with students who lived and looked like her. Like nearly half of the teachers at Meany, she came to the school fresh from college, and has around five years of teaching experience. Like 65 percent of the staff, she is Caucasian. Her preservice training didn't delve into culturally responsive teaching.

In her earliest days at Meany, the rookie stood before her math class and told them that minorities, especially those who are poor, face significant obstacles when it comes to academic success and college admissions. "I was really nervous about bringing up anything about race or socioeconomics," Miller says, adding that one thought always nagged: "Why would they listen to me?"

Miller isn't an anomaly. Eighty percent of preservice teachers are White females, setting up an unavoidable disparity between teacher and taught. While increasing the number of minority teachers nationwide is crucial, "the challenge is not to match the color of the kids they teach," says Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, an Emory University researcher and advocate for culturally responsive teaching. "The challenge is to find better ways to connect to the realities of what students know and live."

One unavoidable reality is the continuing achievement gaps. According to the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests, 13 percent of Black and 19 percent of Hispanic fourth-graders performed at or above proficiency in

Frank talks about race with fellow staffers were uncomfortable, but essential, for teacher **Wendy Miller**, shown here in her classroom.

PHOTO: JIM BRYANT; PHOTO COLLAGE: GROFF CREATIVE INC.; ILLUSTRATION: DAWN HUDSON

A day in teacher **Mona Mendoza's** classroom is rarely dull, whether it's due to a four-legged visitor or an earnest discussion of stereotypes that students encounter because of their race and economic status. Her students say they benefit when lessons relate to their own lives.

math, compared with 47 percent of their White counterparts; similar gaps existed among eighth-graders tested. When poverty is factored into NAEP math performance, there is a 22- to 27-point gap between poor and non-poor fourth- and eighth-graders, respectively. And given that minority groups now account for 12.4 percent of the population—and growing—it's an issue no longer relegated to select schools or states. "Because of the changing demographics of our schools, ignoring it is no longer an option," says Sheila Simmons, director of NEA Human and Civil Rights.

Nor is giving it lip service. Culturally responsive teaching is not about one lesson on Martin Luther King Jr. during Black History Month. It is not serving tacos in the cafeteria on Cinco de Mayo. Beyond heroes and holidays, it is about understanding students' home life, their language, music, dress, behavior, jokes, ideas about success, the role of religion and community in their lives, and more. It is bringing the experiences of their 24-hour day into the seven-hour school day to give them information in a familiar context. Like the teacher in Atlanta who conducts a geometry lesson by talking about geometric patterns in Mexican pottery and African kente cloth and has students bring in examples from home. Or the veteran Chicago teacher who uses "your mama" jokes (clean ones only, of course) to teach students about wordplay and advises fellow teachers that it's a viable way to help disadvantaged Black students decipher complex literary pieces they are exposed to in the classroom.

"I don't think you can move forward... if you're not uncomfortable."

—WENDY MILLER
TEACHER

"We are teaching the whole child, not teaching in a vacuum," says Magda Costantino, a Washington researcher and academic who designed a reading curriculum that incorporates American Indian culture. "If we are serious about closing the achievement gap, we have to address the child within the context of his or her community." Costantino, along with Denny Hurtado, an American Indian education specialist, created their curriculum after searching for culturally appropriate lessons and discovering none existed.

In states like Washington, Oregon, and Wisconsin, there's been a move away from what Simmons calls "a more touchy-feely type of multicultural education that didn't have a strong framework" to more concrete policies and plans. In Seattle, work began in earnest four years ago and now reaches across the entire district. But none of this comes easily. "Some teachers don't feel there is a connection to make," Irvine says. Meany Middle School faculty member Robert Bernstein voices the opposition he sometimes hears: "'I'm spending a lot of time talking about race and not solving math problems.'"

More often, though, educators fear that they'll say or do something wrong. "They feel that to bring up race makes them a racist," Irvine says. "Race has become a four-letter word in schools."

IN THE LATE 1990S, HOWEVER, Meany Middle School's reputation was dismal and race could no longer be ignored. Test scores were low. Discipline problems were high. Although the neighborhoods surrounding it are now seeing more middle-class growth, they were then largely poor. Race and poverty are the most significant factors in Meany's students' performance, says principal Princess Shareef, so when Seattle Public Schools decid-

PHOTOS: JIM BRYANT; ILLUSTRATIONS: DAWN HUDSON

ed to start implementing culturally responsive teaching district-wide four years ago, her school was a ripe target for the improvement it could bring.

A series of corrosively uncomfortable meetings about race kicked off the staff's work. Called "Courageous Conversations," the sessions brought everyone from teachers to education support professionals (ESPs) to administrators into a room to share their ideas about personal and institutional racism and their own life experiences. One of the first questions posed by the mediator—"Does racism exist at Meany?"—had people shifting in their chairs and staring at the floor, Bernstein recalls. When they finally started talking, "people's different ranges of acceptance became evident," he says. Shareef remembers thinking that there wasn't much trust in the room. "Our feelings were pretty divided along racial lines," she says. The long-dormant feeling that a staff member from a different race couldn't possibly understand one's own experiences was now out and hanging in the air.

"I don't think you can move forward with effective culturally responsive teaching if you're not uncomfortable," Miller says. "It meant acknowledging that I don't know everything about other cultures, and that we aren't all the same. If you don't have a staff that's willing to go there, it won't work."

Unlike quick-hit diversity training seminars that merely skim the surface of race and economic status, these sessions marked the start of a lengthy journey. "It's a process over time," Miller says. "There's no way I would have shared things two years ago that I now feel comfortable discussing." Facilitators say the key is to not go too far too fast, or to accuse White, female teachers of being out of touch with their students. It's unfair, and "people will shut down then," Bernstein says.

Facilitators led similar conversations across the Seattle district as part of a systematic effort to bring issues of race and cultural identity out from under the rug. Faced with significant achievement gaps, administrators decided "we had to change because what we were doing was not working," recalls Caprice Hollins, director of the district's office of equity and race relations. That meant institutionalizing culturally responsive teaching, as well as considering all new policies, curriculum, and family outreach programs in the context of students' cultures.

"We're taking a customer service approach—how do we better understand our families?" says Hollins.

Sounds great, but how do I do it?

Reading about culturally responsive teaching is one thing, trying it in the classroom is quite another. Here's what the experts—and the teachers and ESPs just like you who have tried the approach—think you should know. Some of this may sound familiar, but consider how intensely you're delving into these methods.

Question Everything You Know

Start by asking yourself a few questions: Do I know the cultural background of each of my students? Do I integrate literature and resources from their cultures into my lessons? Do I consistently begin my lessons with what students already know from home, community, and school? Do I understand the differences between academic language and my students' social language, and do I find ways to bridge the two?

Contemplate the home life of the student who is sleepy-eyed or apathetic on a particular morning. Perhaps one of his family responsibilities is caring for a younger sibling or an after-school job. The student with the incomplete homework might be hobbled by her parents' inability to speak English. A student who doesn't turn in an assignment describing her house might be reluctant to admit in front of classmates that she lives in a homeless shelter.

"You can't fix most of these things," says researcher Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, "but knowing about them can help you make adjustments and provide support."

Consider cultural cues as well. In some cultures, making eye contact with authority figures or speaking loudly to them is considered disrespectful. "Students' frames of reference can clash with classroom norms," says American Indian education specialist Denny Hurtado. "Some Native Americans want to silently try to work on things before speaking," he says. "But teachers fear that they just don't want to participate."

Says Meany Middle School teacher Wendy Miller, "Examine your frame of reference." Or, as Irvine puts it, "Be curious."

Don't Just Guess or Fall Back on Old Assumptions

Instead, let students talk about elements of their culture, both positive and negative, removing the burden from you to speculate or ask questions that you fear might be too probing. You can start with an assignment that asks students to discuss their life outside of school. For instance, in NEA's educator guide *Culture, Abilities, Resilience, Effort: Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gaps*, teachers are urged to have students describe what they enjoy doing outside of school, with whom they spend most of their time, and whom they admire. Having children elaborate on their culture provides a shortcut to learn more about them, while they practice writing skills.

In one activity, students write about their culture's celebrations, greeting styles, beliefs about hospitality, the role of family, and attitudes about personal space

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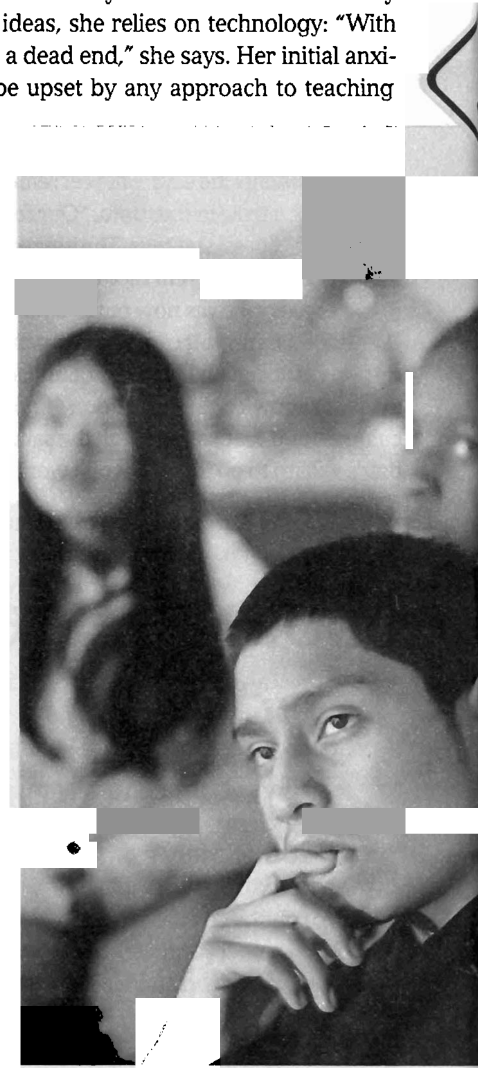
Putting what's learned into practice runs the gamut from academics to parent-teacher conference times and locations, including meeting with parents in their homes and at community centers, to food service options. At Meany, "our cafeteria personnel focus on things as simple as acknowledging that Muslim students don't do pork, or that we may need more rice offerings," Shareef says. "They know these things."

FOUR YEARS LATER, IT'S CLEAR that approach has become deeply ingrained at Meany Middle School. As Mendoza continues working with her students on the birthday party reading passage, she stops to not only have students discuss the misconceptions about race and money its characters display, but also to quiz them on vocabulary. Mendoza then pushes even further, sharing a personal story about being snubbed by a salesclerk at a nearby department store, she believes, because she is Latina. Later, eighth-grader Brea Roberts confides that this type of teaching "makes me think about what happens outside of the classroom, instead of doing straight lessons. It stretches us."

In a nearby lab, science teacher Carol Furry acknowledges that "there is always a little bit of a challenge to find the relevance." But when discussing certain scientific discoveries and principles, she tells her students about minorities who deserve credit. Modern-day scientists and researchers, such as famed neurosurgeon Benjamin Carson, come up in the context of lab assignments and chapter work. If the day's lesson focuses on health, she discusses the prevalence of diabetes, heart disease, and glaucoma in poor and minority communities. When Furry finds herself lacking for ideas, she relies on technology: "With the Web, you're never at a dead end," she says. Her initial anxiety that parents would be upset by any approach to teaching that uses race and economic status subsided, Furry says. "If they didn't like what I was sending home, I'd hear about it."

Language arts and social studies teacher Sarah Lockenvitz focuses on having students explore their



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and privacy. Another has them pen short descriptions of the languages they speak, the music they listen to, the foods they eat at home, what is considered polite and rude in their family, what manners they have been taught, what they wear on special occasions, and what role extended family plays in their life. Imagine how much of an icebreaker such an activity could be.

Get Out of the Classroom

Irvine believes the first step toward cultural competency is heading out into students' neighborhoods. "Go to their homes, go to the African-American churches, go to the Hispanic community centers." But proceed respectfully. "You have to have cultural ambassadors," Irvine says, pointing to fellow staff members, community leaders, or a parent with whom the teacher already has a connection as potential liaisons. "You have to be invited in. Don't just show up to an African-American church like it's a field trip." Each semester, Irvine, who is Black, brings her teaching students to such gathering places in Atlanta. "Once teachers made the effort, the respect for them rose," she says. Stepping into new environments is rarely easy, but can pay significant dividends. "We have to step outside of our comfort zones and push ourselves," says NEA's Denise Alston. "It will make a difference to the child."

Parent-teacher meetings are valuable tools, but the culturally responsive teacher moves beyond the traditional framework for such get-togethers, considering, for example, the schedule of parents working more than one job. Find out if your district has translators or cultural interpreters available and invite them to attend. Or consider meeting with parents at a location in their community.

In Seattle, grant money—including a $250,000 grant from the NEA Foundation—helps pay for teachers to spend days out in the community, familiarizing themselves with the culture of the students it sends to school.

Teach Them Using What They Already Know

Consider your minority and low-income students' experiences as valuable tools, not deficits, says Alston. It's called an "assets-based model," and it means taking what others might discount as problems for the child—poverty, English as a second language—and viewing them as building blocks for perseverance and resilience.

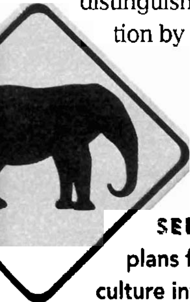
Using your newly widened frame of reference (remember the first point?), try recalibrating your lessons to match their experiences. For instance, when giving a geography lesson, use the names and patterns of students' neighborhood streets. In social studies, do a substantial unit on South America, Africa, or Asia, inviting students to talk about what they know about the lands from which their families hail. Have your math students write a rap song to describe a principle, such as how to reduce fractions. If your elementary school students use public transportation, have them bring in bus or subway schedules and use them as the focal point for a lesson on time or map reading. "It says to a child, 'You bring something,'" says Alston, "and it lets you build on that."

East Haven, Connecticut, teacher Joseph Marangell's ninth-grade history students spend the first five minutes of the period

own cultures, sharing what they know about them and talking about how it informs their lives. And in the library, media specialist Susan Jenkins stocks her shelves with as many multicultural books as possible, including reference material focusing on distinguished minority leaders in multiple fields, works of fiction by and about minorities, and books on such issues as bullying, teen pregnancy, and child abuse. "Through what kids are reading, they can see their own lives reflected," Jenkins says. Throughout the year, the library is also a gathering spot for parents and students who attend special sessions highlighting the student body's different cultures.

Despite Seattle's top-to-bottom adoption of a culturally responsive approach, "we have wonderful teachers and leaders who don't get it," Hollins says. Not because they're bad teachers. Rather, "they think that this should be a colorblind society where race doesn't—or shouldn't—matter." But when teachers see how the approach works, Irvine says, "they believe it."

Miller's seen it in her students' level of engagement. Her peers, in turn, point to her as evidence that a White, middle-class teacher can reach students who don't look like her. Miller, who openly acknowledges that she once worried about appearing racist just by bringing race up, has gained confidence. Still, the memories of those first uncomfortable days are still powerful enough to bring an expression of mock horror to her face as she recalls them. But, she adds, "kids know reality, and they understand I'm not pointing out anything that isn't true. It's adults who don't want to talk about race and money." nea



Want to learn more? Head to www.nea.org/crt to:

SEE IT IN ACTION: Check out video clips and lesson plans from a DVD that incorporates American Indian culture into a reading curriculum. The DVD's creator says the lessons can easily be adapted to engage students of other cultures.

ASK THE EXPERTS: Pose your questions about the teaching method to researchers and middle school educator Wendy Miller, who has made it work for her in the classroom.

GET EXTRA RESOURCES: Check out a list of books and programs that offer more guidance on culturally responsive teaching.

writing in journals "about issues relevant to both their own lives and the history curriculum," he says. The East Haven High students then share their writing, "providing a springboard for each day's lesson."

Use the Work of Those Ahead of You

Don't try to reinvent the wheel when it comes to selecting appropriate books or lesson plans. Hurtado recalls the day he decided to talk about American Indian canoes in conjunction with a reading lesson and opened a book on the topic. The pictures misidentified American Indian tribes—something he, as a member of the Skokomish Tribe, quickly spotted, but someone else might not have realized.

With that in mind, he and partner Magda Costantino did the heavy lifting, designing their American Indian reading curriculum on a DVD that contains reading passages, photos, and video clips, including interviews with tribal elders. This fall, the pair is adapting the program for the U.S. Department of Education to use nationwide. A similar effort is in full swing in Wisconsin, where members of the state's 11 tribes have partnered with the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) in developing a culturally responsive education package. Supported with NEA and WEAC grants, the package includes a teacher's guide, DVDs, posters, and magazines. (Head to www.nea.org/crt for more culturally responsive teaching tools.)

Reach out to those who have come before you, too. Within the Black community, retired teachers can be tapped as a resource to share their strategies for reaching ethnic minorities. "There are people out there who know how to do it," says Irvine. "We need to find them."

Know That You're Supported

For NEA, promoting culturally responsive teaching is not subject to the fickle winds of education reform. It's part of the Association's resolutions, which state clearly that ethnic-minority teachers must be involved in selecting educational materials and those resources should contain points of view that realistically portray ethnic minorities' lives. NEA plans to allocate $200,000 over the next two years to promote adoption of cultural competence standards for educators in five policy arenas affecting educator preparation, induction, and professional development.

Tap into Lesson Plans

Culturally responsive lessons available in books and online can often be adapted to address different cultures and different grades. "Make it personal for your students," says Hurtado, and "work with your local communities so it's authentic."

For example, the book *Teaching About Asian Pacific Americans* offers an adaptable business and marketing lesson. Students select a magazine and compare the number of ads featuring Asian-American models with the total number of ads, and describe the product and company that these models promote. Students then discuss or write about how the ad maintains or breaks stereotypes. Does it have derogatory images or language? Students are asked how they might recreate the ad.

VISIT WWW.NEA.ORG/CRT for additional examples of lessons geared toward American Indians, Blacks, and Hispanics.

PHOTOS: JIM BRYANT; ROAD SIGN PHOTO: BOB AINSWORTH