



Classroom vignettes shed light on cultural competence

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In 2019, New York Attorney General Letitia James launched an investigation into a social studies lesson on slavery at a local private school. In this lesson, a 5th-grade teacher staged a “re-enactment” wherein Black students were cast as slaves in a mock auction and lined up in front of the class to be

bid on by the other students (Kaur, 2019). Unsurprisingly, the attorney general’s investigation found that this situation caused profound harm to the students, especially the Black students.

Pause for a minute, and let this situation — and its likely short- and long-term impacts — sink in.

Although we don’t know the

teacher’s background, motivation, or intentions, we know that she showed a distressing lack of cultural competence that had a devastating effect in her classroom. As Attorney General James said in a statement at the time, “Every young person — regardless of race — deserves the chance to attend school free of harassment, bias, and

Every student deserves to be seen, included, understood, and celebrated. For that to happen, teachers need to be culturally competent. Cultural competence is best built through reflecting on and discussing real-world experiences. Classroom vignettes support this difficult but important work.

discrimination.” And that’s not all they deserve. Every student deserves to be seen, included, understood, and celebrated. For that to happen, all teachers need to be culturally competent.

Although this situation is an extreme example, students of color frequently experience microaggressions and macroaggressions that stem from lack of cultural competence. These situations show the need for more nuanced teacher reflection, particularly on the subtleties (and not-so-subtleties) of racism, bias, white fragility, and power that are at play in classrooms. Teachers need support in reflecting on these subtleties and learning when and why they must change behavior that — even when well-intentioned — can be harmful.

Inequitable learning environments, rife with microaggressions, are common, in part, because of cultural mismatches between teachers, 81% of whom are white, and their students, 51.1% of whom are students of color (Taie & Goldring, 2020). The implications are real and devastating, affecting individual students as well as entire populations of Black, Brown, and Indigenous students. K-12 students who experience

microaggressions are at risk for higher rates of anger, stress, and anxiety (Huynh, 2012). Further, teachers are often unaware they are engaging in microaggressions, as these tend to be driven by teachers’ implicit biases, which can also impact other aspects of teachers’ pedagogy (NEA, 2021).

Multiple studies have shown that even when academic achievement is held constant, teachers have lower expectations for students of color and those who live in poverty (Gershenson et al., 2015) than for their peers. When teachers hold lower expectations, they are more likely to make pedagogical decisions that are less engaging, constructivist, and corrective (Good & Nichols, 2001). Many educators, especially those who are white, hold these (often unconscious) lower expectations because they have not acquired the cultural competence that would effectively prepare them for their students’ diversity (Ladson-Billings, 2002).

Cultural competence includes dispositions and skills that facilitate positive interactions with people of different cultural backgrounds, and it is developed through experiences, education, and critical reflection. The

development of cultural competence increases a person’s capacity for having critical conversations about race, class, gender, age, and ability that ultimately lead to more understanding and a change in expectations, which in turn influences dispositions and can lead to more positive interactions and behaviors that ultimately result in better school experiences and outcomes for all students.

Preservice, novice, and veteran teachers alike need strategic support in developing cultural competence in and out of the classroom. Cultural competence is best built through reflecting on and discussing real-world experiences, both formally and informally. Classroom vignettes are one tool to support this difficult but important work.

In this article, we share three fictional classroom vignettes that explore several related aspects of teaching and learning that contribute to whether classrooms are equitable, culturally responsive environments, including school culture, language, and curriculum. We also share reflection prompts to help educators think about whether and how the people in the vignettes embody cultural competence and begin to explore

VIGNETTE 1: FINGER SNAPS

Teacher background: Matthew Potter is a 25-year-old white male in an alternative certification program that placed him into a 5th-grade classroom at a poverty-impacted school serving 100% students of color, predominantly Black and Latiné. His undergraduate degree is in history, and he has completed 10 weeks of training with 20 hours of classroom experience. He has said that he feels “called” to this work and that educational equity is “the social justice movement of our time.”

Scenario: Potter is teaching his morning literacy block to his 28 students, which begins with a daily “do-now” assignment that is to be completed in silence. He has brought the students into the classroom and gotten them started. The transition into the room went smoothly, but as students begin to work on their assignment, a small murmur emerges from the group. Potter begins to redirect behavior with corrections such as, “You need to be working on your do-now” and “Blue group, get back to work or you’ll be staying in at recess.” After about a minute, he has not managed to squelch the murmur, and he begins to “tsk” with his teeth and snap his fingers at students in attempts to redirect their behavior until they are back on task.

After completing the reflection prompts, consider:

- Potter’s behavioral expectation for silence. Do you find this culturally appropriate? Why or why not?
- Potter’s use of language, “tsks,” snaps, and finger pointing as behavior management strategies in the learning environment. Do you consider this to be culturally appropriate? Why or why not?

Resources:

- To learn more about culturally and developmentally appropriate behavioral expectations and responses, see Delpit (2006), Hollie (2018), Milner et al. (2019), and the *Sanford Inspire Implementation Manual* at www.inspiresel.org/wp-content/uploads/doc/Sanford_Inspire_Implementation_Manual.pdf.
- To reflect on your own classroom management practices, consider the Culturally Responsive Classroom Management Self-Efficacy Scale (Siwatu et al., 2017) or the Learning for Justice Common Beliefs Survey at www.learningforjustice.org/professional-development/common-beliefs-survey-teaching-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-students.

where they are in developing their own cultural competence. The vignettes and reflection prompts are useful for educators in multiple roles as well as professional learning facilitators in their work with teachers and leaders.

Using these vignettes gives teachers an opportunity to engage in thoughtful reflection about their own beliefs and practices. The vignettes are also intended to inspire further cultural competence work so that, ultimately, teachers have an opportunity to evaluate and grow in their knowledge of long-standing structural inequities and injustice; see the humanity in their students, colleagues, families, and communities; evaluate and reflect on their values and

internal reward systems; and foster more effective classroom practices and school leadership that will encourage the eradication of antiquated and harmful ideas and behaviors.

ABOUT THE VIGNETTES

The three vignettes are designed to address a variety of situations that could arise at various points in a teacher’s career and in a variety of settings. Each vignette begins with the teacher’s background to establish some baseline information about where the teacher is coming from. The vignette then describes a scenario that occurs in the teacher’s classroom and that reflects either attention to or absence of cultural competence.

The reflection prompts in the box on p. 41 can be used with each vignette. They are designed to help readers actively and intentionally evaluate their beliefs and understanding as they read. We provide more specific prompts after each vignette as well as suggested resources for further reflection and learning.

WHAT’S NEXT?

The vignettes and reflection prompts are a helpful way for educators to begin exploring cultural competence and their own beliefs and practices that come from their own lived experiences. What comes next? There are myriad ways to continue to learn and unlearn

VIGNETTE 2: THE CURRICULUM AS ASSIMILATIONIST

Teacher background: Stacey Kane is a 46-year-old white female teacher with 22 years of experience. She teaches 8th-grade social studies to 23 students, 11 of whom are female, 10 of whom are male, and two of whom are nonbinary, in a predominantly (59%) white, middle-class community. Less than 7% of the student population qualifies for free and reduced lunch. According to the state standardized assessment report, 78% of the students in the district are achieving at or above grade-level proficiency in reading.

Scenario: Kane is using social studies content standards to teach the principles and ideals upon which the United States was founded. She introduces the lesson by providing content knowledge and concepts, which include an abbreviated account of citizens' constitutional rights, via the Bill of Rights. She then requires students to read the first chapter of their social studies textbook, which discusses the development of these first 10 amendments. The chapter only mentions white, property-owning men and does not include stories or perspectives of anyone from another race, gender, or economic status. No primary sources are included.

Kane asks the students to work with a partner and write their responses to the end-of-chapter questions for credit. She does not include additional questions or ask the students to engage in critical analysis of the text, such as identifying the author's lens, whose story is being told throughout the chapter, or whose stories are missing. There is little student-to-teacher discourse during the lesson. Students talk quietly among themselves, mostly to check in with one another about the progress of lesson completion

and outside topics, but these whispered conversations are quickly silenced.

In later reflections, Kane says, "I think the lesson went very well" and indicates that these pedagogies are typical of her daily instruction.

After completing the reflection prompts, consider:

- Whose voices are included in the selected reading? Whose are missing?
- What are the implications of this for students' understanding of history?
- What are their implications for students' opportunity to see themselves in history?
- Are Kane's pedagogical practices and behavioral expectations culturally responsive? Why or why not?

Resources:

- To learn more about culturally appropriate pedagogy, see Hammond (2014), Ladson-Billings (2021), and Muhammad (2020, 2023).
- To reflect on whether your curricular resources and pedagogy are culturally responsive, consider *New America's Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Reflection Guide* (Muñiz, 2020) and New York University's Culturally Responsive Scorecards (NYU/Steinhardt, 2022).
- To learn more about culturally inclusive social studies, consider the resources from Learning for Justice (www.learningforjustice.org) as well as Black History 365 (blackhistory365education.org).

and to grow and cultivate cultural competence. Here are four suggested pathways to get started.

Provide designated time and space for dialogue around the vignettes and beyond. This is critical for furthering our cultural competence and abilities to grow ourselves and each other. You can use the vignettes to engage in critical discussions during professional learning or find colleagues with whom to have informal conversations.

For those early in their journey toward cultural competence, listen

to the voices of historically excluded communities. Follow them on social media platforms and listen. Refrain from responding to their posts. Read the literature of thinkers like Ibram X. Kendi, Bettina Love, Gholdy Muhammad, Chezare Warren, and more. Sit quietly in any discomfort or fragility you experience rather than responding defensively or offering counterarguments.

For those who have been journeying for a while, continue engaging in the tasks above and

consider longer-term commitments.

These include the 21-day challenges from America & Moore (n.d), Michigan League for Public Policy (2020), and the United Way of Central Iowa (n.d.).

If you believe you have arrived at cultural competence, take time to consider if that is a real possibility and then continue the work. For those who have recognized that cultural competence is a lifelong journey, consider how you might engage with communities in the work that you do.

VIGNETTE 3: THE BLACK NATIONAL ANTHEM

Teacher background: Megan Carroll is a white teacher who has recently graduated from a traditional teacher education program at a large state university. Natasha Little is an African American teacher who recently graduated from a large, private, Catholic institution. Both Carroll and Little have strong content knowledge and professional dispositions, and both are deeply passionate about their work.

As first-year teachers of record, Carroll and Little have been placed as co-teachers in a 2nd-grade classroom. The classroom has 14 African American students, seven white students, two students who identify as biracial, and two Indigenous students. Five children are bilingual (English and Spanish).

The co-teaching arrangement is a new concept for both teachers. Little believes students benefit from the combined curricular and experiential knowledge of two teachers in one classroom. Carroll is reluctant but willing to try, and she is encouraged by Little's enthusiasm.

Scenario: Little is teaching a language arts lesson while Carroll is conducting a one-on-one reading assessment with a student in the hallway. During this time, Carroll overhears Little saying to the whole class, "Did you know we have not one but two national anthems?" She then asks, "Who has ever heard 'The Star-Spangled Banner'?" and plays a brief clip.

Carroll pauses the assessment, deeply concerned about what is going to come next, as she knows there is only one national anthem. "I see so many of you recognize

this! But there is another!" Little continues. "Who has ever heard 'Lift Every Voice and Sing'?" As she begins to play a clip, Carroll heads into the classroom. Before Little can continue, Carroll interjects, "That's a pretty song, Ms. Little, but I want to clarify something for the class. That song is beautiful but it is not the national anthem. There is only one, and it is 'The Star-Spangled Banner' that Ms. Little played first."

After completing the reflection prompts, consider:

- What are your reactions to Little introducing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" as a second national anthem? Why?
- What are your reactions to Carroll's objection, including both the content of the objection and the manner in which she objected?
- How might hearing this objection affect the students, their learning, and their relationships with the teachers?

Resources:

- To learn more about the cultural significance of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," see Karimi & Willingham, 2020.
- To further reflect on your current classroom practices, consider using the Culturally Responsive Pedagogy self-assessment from Due East Educational Equity Collaborative (n.d.).

Teaching is inherently political, and teachers bring their personal socialization into every classroom. Now, with every aspect of public education under attack, a global pandemic laying bare long-standing inequalities, and facing a social reckoning and significant turning point, it is critical that our educators do the work of unpacking their beliefs and actions toward their students.

If teachers and schools are to live out the potential for high-quality, engaging, meaningful learning for *all*, teachers must understand their identities and how those influence their teaching, recognize and interrogate

their biases, and learn to see students in the fullness of *all* their identities. We all have power to disrupt and transform the experiences of our students.

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REFLECTION PROMPTS

- What are my initial gut reactions to this vignette and why?
- What are the educators' assumptions or biases in the scenario?
- What assumptions or biases are present in my own reflections about this scenario?
- What questions would I ask of the characters in the vignette to better understand the perspectives of the teachers and students?
- What questions should I ask myself to understand what has shaped my own perspective?
- In collaboration with others, what questions can I ask or stories can I offer to push my own thinking and the group discussion around cultural competence in the classroom?
- What next steps do I need to take to grow in my understanding of and ability to reflect on these scenarios with more nuance? What additional learning (and unlearning) do I need to do as a result of my reflections?

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