

# **Building Teacher Competency To Work with Diverse Learners in the Context of International Education**

**By Maria Luiza Dantas**

## **Introduction**

The increasing diversity and complexity in classrooms is happening in schools around the world. The United States (U.S.), Canada, Sweden, Holland, France, and other countries all face the challenge of addressing the needs of a growing diverse student population; in particular, supporting achievement and engagement across language and cultural boundaries, and taking into account different perspectives (Suárez-Orozco, 2005). Teachers need to develop knowledge and skills to succeed

in teaching diverse children otherwise “they do not continue to believe that ‘all children can learn’” (Banks et al., 2005, p.270). Over the past two decades, teacher education programs have incorporated multicultural education theories to build teacher education students’ (including prospective and in-service teachers) understanding of diversity (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McIntyre, Rosebery & González, 2001; Moll, 1994). Yet, teacher education and professional development programs’ ability to foster transformed under-

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standings remains problematic. One challenge in multicultural education is going beyond acquiring knowledge or preparing the mind on diversity issues and their educational implications to using “knowledge in action.” That is,

The problem of knowing something but failing to have it guide one’s action is ubiquitous. Many years ago, Alfred Whitehead (1929) warned about the dangers of inert knowledge. This involves knowledge that is available to people in the sense that they can talk about it when explicitly asked to do so. . . . However, the knowledge is inert in the sense that it does not guide one’s thinking and actions in new settings. (Hammerness et al., 2005, p. 372)

Education programs with an international component are in a unique position to engage teacher education students in firsthand exploration of cultural and diversity understandings, promote students’ inert knowledge into action, create rich spaces for dialogue, and guide the design of culturally responsive curriculum. In particular, guided international experiences can challenge teacher education students to use inert knowledge to read and interpret their experiences with diversity and understanding of self, and the interconnectedness with their own students’ lives and school opportunities.

In line with Moll and González’s (2004) “funds of knowledge” approach and an ethnographic perspective (Frank, 1999; Green, Dixon & Zaharlick, 2003), this paper reports on an international experience designed, within a sociocultural frame, for teacher education students to examine theoretical knowledge and make visible local knowledge on diversity issues, and the interrelatedness and complexity of language, literacy and culture and its impact on educational practices. It examines the context of international education, as part of a graduate program of studies, as a promising way for teacher education students to gain knowledge of communities’ funds of knowledge and situated cultural and literacy practices, use knowledge and engage in action as learners in an uncommon, out-of-the-ordinary context, and act on personal, professional and instructional implications.

This international experience, which involved a course taught in the U.S. and Brazil, was designed to engage American graduate students, with different levels of teaching experience, in active exploration of their assumptions about the nature of literacy and culture, and communities’ funds of knowledge. The purpose of this situated learning experience was to deepen teacher education students’ understanding of self, cultural identities and deficit beliefs, and its impact on their curriculum design and instructional process, and interactions with their own students and their families. The experience also engaged teachers in a professional dialogue about teacher education with educators from another country. In the next sections, I (a) provide a description of the sociocultural frame used to guide the interactions of U.S. and Brazilian educators, with variations in language, culture, race, socioeconomic status and ways of thinking and learning patterns; (b) describe the context of the study; and (c) examine and discuss its impact on the teacher education

students' knowledge construction and pedagogical context. Central to the discussion is an analysis of "frame clashes" (Green et al., 2003) in local encounters in a different environment in which the ordinary is disrupted and divergent expectations are made visible, challenging students' understandings, assumptions and beliefs about the nature of knowledge, learning and teaching, and juxtaposing educational systems and range of understandings within a professional, cross-national dialogue about education programs. This paper examines the American students' explorations and cultural clashes, what became visible about their invisible assumptions that turned into "rich points" (Agar, 1994) and led to transformed understandings and actions.

### **Orienting Frame: A Sociocultural Perspective**

The design of this international experience was guided by a sociocultural framework and set of premises on the nature of learning and knowledge, and culture and literacy practices. In particular, the view of human behavior as embedded within social practices (Cole & Scribner, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, rather than an individual act, the process of knowledge construction is a situated event in which meanings are created, recreated and shaped within historical, social, political, linguistic, and cultural contexts (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Dantas, 1999; Dyson 1993; Heath, 1983; Solsken, 1993; Weade, 1992).

One important concept underlying sociocultural studies is the nature of culture, which is informed by social and cultural theories developed in anthropology, sociology as well as psychology and literary theory. In particular, this study and international experience were guided by three orienting constructs on: -what constitutes the cultural makeup of a society, the circumstances in which culture is revealed, and how cultural understanding is built. First, rather than a monolithic entity determining the behaviors of group members, the cultural makeup of a society involves "a *mélange* of understandings and expectations regarding a variety of activities that serve as guides to their conduct and interpretation" (Goodenough, 1993, p. 267). Second, culture is a dynamic, dialogic and fluid concept. Though the notion of culture initially developed as a conceptual system to depict isolated traditional communities, culture becomes apparent when there is a problem with language, but the problem has to do with more than language and with who you are (Agar, 1994). As Agar explains, culture becomes an answer, not a label, to the problem of understanding differences and other ways of doing things become possible. Thus, teachers need to be aware of the central role of culture on what is important to learn and how learning takes place across contexts (Horowitz et al., 2005). Finally, building cultural understandings happens when the local culture, "a peculiar blend of objective arbitrariness," is made visible and dismantles the "subjective taken-for-grantedness" ideological construct of a "universal human nature" (Rosaldo, 1993). In addition, current work on subject positionings and

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multiple cultural identities complicates the notion of cultural membership and role-relationships; in other words, beyond being a male or female, Brazilian or American, successful or non-successful student, there are multiple ways of being situated within ongoing negotiation of contradictions and power relations in a particular society (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998; Walkerdine, 1990; Weedon, 1987).

Language learning, including literacy practices, is an integral part of the enculturation process. It is shaped by and it shapes culture. Language is a primary vehicle through which different elements of culture are transmitted (e.g., knowledge, attitude and skills) as well as a tool to explore/manipulate the social environment and establish status and role-relationships (Saville-Troike, 2003). Similarly, literacy involves “a set of socially organized practices” defined by purposes and contexts of use (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236). There are multiple literacies constructed and situated within different contexts of activity (e.g., family, school, work, church and street literacies), and symbolic systems (e.g., computer, music, visual and other similar literacies). Thus, learning particular literacy practices involves acquiring specific cultural, social and discursive practices that are historically, socially, politically and culturally situated. Further, “Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 8). For example, school literacies tend to privilege mainstream academic knowledge, and they often reinforce deficit beliefs on what constitutes knowledge and exclude other diverse forms of literacy and sociocultural capital. In this sense, intrinsic to teaching is teachers’ effectiveness as “cultural workers” (Freire, 1998), “border crossers” (Giroux, 1991) or bridge builders across language, literacies, social class, racial, cultural differences and academic abilities.

### **An Ethnographic and Funds of Knowledge Approach as Strategies of Inquiry**

The need for teachers to develop competency to work effectively with diverse learners has increased taking into account the demographics of American schools, the predominance of white teachers in the work force, and the achievement gap of minority, low socioeconomic, and often linguistically and culturally diverse students (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). It is not that white teachers are incapable of delivering quality instruction to students who are ethnically different (Collier, 2002); rather, the challenge resides in the damaging impact of deficit beliefs and stereotypes about what counts as learning, literacy and family involvement combined with the invisibility and disconnect of what diverse students bring as funds of knowledge in classroom assessment and instructional practices. Similarly, intrinsic to the diversity challenge, global interdependence and the impact of globalization cannot be ignored in teacher preparation and professional development as well as students’ curricula. The example of intensive education reforms

focusing on teacher education in many countries (among others, Hong Kong, Finland, New Zealand, and Portugal) alerts to the fact that “preparing accomplished teachers who can effectively teach a wide array of learners to high standards is essential to economic and political survival” (Darling-Hammond, 2005, p.237). For instance, the People’s Republic of China’s effort to increase international focus in schools includes hosting visiting international teachers and encouraging teachers to study abroad (Stewart, 2005).

In line with multicultural theories and research, this study explores a framework for situated learning within the context of intercultural and education-abroad activities. Sociocultural and ethnographic perspectives provide the pedagogical and analytical tools to build teacher education students’ understanding of self, culture and literacy practices, and examination of the implications to learning. Moreover, an international context allows for intercultural and cross-national interactions and examination of education practices.

The complex and rich intersection between school and family/community practices requires that teachers become “cultural brokers” (Gay, 1993) in order to bring the diversity of students’ and families’ funds of knowledge into the learning/teaching process. Taking up an ethnographic perspective help teachers develop new lenses for seeing and talking about the patterns and practices of life within classrooms, communities and families, and making visible the ways in which individual lenses differ and shape what each person is able to see, interpret and come to understand (Frank, 1999; Green et al., 2003). The funds of knowledge approach draws on a sociocultural frame to make visible the accumulated bodies of knowledge and social, cultural and linguistic practices of diverse communities. Moll and colleagues’ work on funds of knowledge offers a critical example of teacher development and assessment of Spanish-speaking families and communities’ resources via in-depth contact with families, home visits, interviews and documentation of their sociocultural and linguistic capital (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; McIntyre et al., 2001; Moll, 1994; Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992).

It is important to note that the process of transforming understanding into action is another factor contributing to the diversity challenge. Gaining theoretical knowledge is important but not enough to change teachers’ dispositions and assumptions towards culturally, racially, linguistically and socioeconomic diverse students, families and communities. Multicultural research makes a case for teacher education pedagogies that immerse prospective teachers in the process of acquiring knowledge (e.g., school and community visits; service learning opportunities; studies of students, classrooms, schools and communities; and field experiences in diverse contexts with culturally responsive teachers), and provide guided opportunities for reflection and examination of assumptions and beliefs about self and others through autobiographies, narratives and life histories, etc (Banks et al., 2005). Central to these pedagogies is preparing teacher education students to use emerging knowledge to design “culturally sensitive curriculum” (or culturally

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relevant pedagogy) and assessment materials responsive to the interactional, linguistic, cognitive and learning patterns of diverse learners, and inclusive of the social, cultural and intellectual capital of diverse students, families and communities (Banks et al.; Au & Jordan, 1981; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1997; McIntyre et al., 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2001). However, teachers' beliefs, stereotypes and cultural models are resistant to change. They are built over years of schooling and established by the time they enter college, and their newly acquired beliefs are vulnerable to change (Woolfolk Hoy & Murphy, 2001). A cohesive program of studies including guided, situated learning opportunities in an international context offers distinctive opportunities to disrupt and make visible culture and invisible assumptions about learning and literacy, and impact educational changes.

### **Context: International Experience, Participants, and Study Description**

This paper reports on phase 1 of an ongoing academic and research project jointly developed by two universities: one located in Southern California and the other in Brazil's Northeast region. For the purpose of this paper, the particular focus is on a group of six American teacher education students exploring their understanding of culture and their own cultural identities and its impact on their teaching and knowledge of the social, cultural and intellectual capital of diverse students, families and communities. It is important to note that this international experience took place within the context of a graduate program in Literacy education with central courses explicitly grounded in sociocultural perspectives.

#### ***International Experience***

Phase 1 of this cross-national partnership consisted of the implementation of a graduate course entitled "Community and Family Literacies and Funds of Knowledge." This course was implemented in the U.S. and Brazil. It involved four class sessions in the U.S. prior to the international experience, eight days in Brazil, and one follow-up session back in the U.S. Informed by a sociocultural framework, the four initial sessions aimed at examining and building a common knowledge and language around issues of culture; one's own cultural expectations and practices; cultural and literacy practices in schools, homes and communities; and developing skills in taking field notes from an ethnographic perspective on "notetaking/notemaking" (Frank, 1999). Course discussions, readings and a final assignment also explored transformative forms of education such as critical pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching (Freire, 1998; Ladson-Billings 1994; Lee, 1997). This course is immersed in a graduate program in Literacy education with core courses grounded in sociocultural theories.

The international and experiential learning portion of the course involved eight days of interaction and collaboration between American and Brazilian teacher

education students, university faculty and community members. It was carefully designed to explore particular literacy and cultural events of Brazil's Northeast region and communities' funds of knowledge; specifically, low socioeconomic communities' oral and written practices in their local context of language use (e.g., visits to schools and informal education programs, community centers focusing on folklore and regional culture, a fishing community, and other similar settings). One component of this experience was pairing Brazilian and American teachers, all of whom were either prospective or in-service teachers. Each pair interacted via e-mail prior to meeting in Brazil, visited his/her Brazilian buddy's home, and actively participated in and engaged in ongoing dialogue about program activities.

### **Participants**

The twenty-two teacher education students and two instructors taking part in the project were from diverse socioeconomic, language, cultural and racial backgrounds. American participants were female, between 21 and 29 years old, and included five European-Americans (Julie, Cindy, Barb, Alexis and Amber) and one Mexican-American (Cristina). Pseudonyms have been used to protect the students' anonymity.

The students came from middle to upper middle-class backgrounds. Julie, Cindy, Amber and Cristina grew up in California, and Barb and Alexis were raised on the East Coast. This group of students mirrors the demographics of California's public school teachers in which the majority of teachers are white, female (<http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us>) and middle class. Many were successful learners in school, and for most, their family literacy practices closely matched the academic practices and mainstream academic knowledge of their schools.

All American students except for Amber were working on a master's degree with a specialization in literacy education. Three of the five graduate students (Julie, Barb and Alexis) were in a combined credential and master's degree program, and the other two (Cindy and Cristina) were novice teachers in public elementary schools in a low-income and a highly diverse community in Southern California. Amber was working on a teaching credential as part of her undergraduate degree. The four prospective teachers (including Amber) were at different phases in their credential program: two (Barb and Julie) had completed their credential program requirements, and the other two (Amber and Alexis) had completed the coursework and field experiences and needed only to complete student teaching.

All of the American students had traveled internationally, mostly to Europe, for a study-abroad program and/or vacation with family and/or friends. They had not been to South America and Brazil, and they did not speak Portuguese. Cristina, who was a bilingual teacher, used her knowledge of Spanish to decode Portuguese words.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Processes**

This qualitative study is part of a larger study on the impact of intercultural and education-abroad activities on a group of American and Brazilian educators. The



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larger research project includes data collection and analysis of the impact of this course on Brazilian students and faculty, as well as cross-case analysis of its impact on American and Brazilian students.

Data collection and analysis were informed by sociocultural, ethnographic and interpretive perspectives (Erickson, 1986; Green et al., 2003; Marshall, 1992). Data were collected in two phases—during the course and after the course was completed. In the first phase, data sources included field notes, videotapes of course activities in Brazil, all written course assignments including journal entries and e-mails from participants, and course materials and documents. Data sources for the second phase consisted of written questionnaires, follow-up interviews, and collection of study-related papers and other materials developed by the American students for their final graduate cumulative assessment or portfolio project.

Data were analyzed using qualitative coding of data and content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It involved a systematic and recursive process of organizing, annotating, reflecting and revising meanings; coding, relating and recalling data collected during and after the course implementation; and a case description of each participant. The process of constructing cases of each study participant was guided by an interpretive methodology (Erickson, 1986), which allows examining “how specific people, in specific social circumstances, interpret or make sense of their everyday interactions” (Dyson, 1997, p. 168). Agar’s (1994) concept of cultural clashes (disruptions of the ordinary) and rich points (frame clashes turned into learning opportunities) were used as analytical tools. Building on Agar’s notion of rich points and applying it to education, this paper examines the instances of disruption as awareness and place of dialogue. Data sources were triangulated for further confirmation of themes and patterns.

### **Intercultural Activities as a Strategy of Inquiry and Pedagogical Tools**

This international experiential learning activity offered opportunities for students to immerse in new contexts and language, and make visible for reflection and evaluation their beliefs about culture and families and communities’ literacies and funds of knowledge. This learning experience is particularly significant because it provided the teacher education students with the opportunity, through their use of a sociocultural, ethnographic and funds-of-knowledge approach, to read and interpret the interactions and experiences in the international context. This section describes and examines (1) the frame clashes or disruptions to the ordinary of students’ lives in the U.S. and how students turned them into rich points; and (2) the students’ building and transformed understandings of culture, cultural identities and diversity, and their relationship with literacy practices.



***Disrupting the Ordinary: Making Visible the Invisible***

The presence of frame clashes throughout the international learning experience created a context for discussion of rich points and reflection on culture, expectations and social positionings. Frame clashes provided a context for cross-cultural dialogue, exploration of cultural identities, and de-construction of ordinary family/community practices and its impact on how participants experienced other cultures. Being in a completely new environment and language, plus engaging in ongoing dialogue with Brazilian teachers who spoke English, disrupted students' ordinary assumptions and challenged their understanding of students, classrooms and the nature of learning. These experiences led to exploration and transformed understanding, making visible their assumptions and range of understanding about the nature of learning and their own cultural identities and assumptions about teaching. Table 1 identifies unexpected frame clashes, their local spaces and embedded cultural and literacy practices, and student actions during day 1 of the course's international component. This information is based on field notes and the students' journal entries taken within an ethnographic perspective on notetaking/notemaking (Frank, 1999).

The students' assumptions were first disrupted as they navigated traveling procedures, and flying to Brazil on their own afforded different opportunities to challenge ordinary expectations and repertoire of actions. As table 1 shows, the students traveled in two groups. I had originally planned to travel with them; however, I decided to arrive a day earlier to check on course arrangements, logistics and confer with my Brazilian colleague. For two students, Cindy and Cristina, the unexpected disruptions lead to escalating levels of frustration and second thoughts on attending the international portion of the course. Cindy and Cristina's series of frame clashes started in the U.S. as they arrived late at their departing airport for checking in from their starting city to the final destination in Brazil. They were able to take the booked connecting flight to Los Angeles but they were unsuccessful in checking in and making their connecting flight to São Paulo, which was overbooked. This situation, which started on Saturday, resulted in a sequence of unsuccessful and highly frustrating interactions with two airlines (one Brazilian and the other American) at the Los Angeles International Airport and finally flying to Brazil on Monday. As Cristina described the situation in her journal entry:

The lady just said that 'there [is] no room for you.' I was shocked because I couldn't believe they really had overbooked this flight and that [Barb] was going all the way through but [Cindy] and I were left stranded in L.A., which is not a fun place for me. I asked the lady why they did that and she just said that every airline does it. I was livid and wanted to just let her know that that was wrong...

However, the progression of these cultural clashes, which began in their own country, turned into rich points as they informed Cristina and Cindy's reading, observations, interactions, ongoing dialogue and sense-making of Brazilian con-

Table 1.  
Local Spaces, Practices, and Unexpected Frame Clashes: An Analysis of Day 1.

Data Sources	Spaces	Cultural and Literacy Practices in Action	Unexpected Frame Clashes	Actions
Day 1 Data Sources: Student Journals and Field Notes.	International Traveling as a Set of Literacy and Cultural Practices	<p>Navigating airport procedures in the U.S. and Brazil: check-in procedures in departure U.S. city and connecting city, Los Angeles; arrival and customs in São Paulo, Brazil; and check-in procedures in São Paulo to final destination.</p> <p>Using what they [students] knew, their repertoires of airport and international traveling procedures, to make sense of new words and unexpected situations in local and foreign contexts.</p>	<p>Prior repertory of common practices to navigate international traveling procedures did not work for all students, who were all experienced travelers. Disruptions of perceived knowledge necessary to navigate international traveling, and ordinary expectations.</p> <p>Students organized their travel plans within two groups: A and B. In group A, one student (Barb) arrived at the final destination as expected. The two other students (Cindy and Cristina) encountered a sequence of frame clashes and multiple levels of frustration over a period of 3 days: late arrival, inability to make international flight, series of missed flights, overnight hotel stay, deciding to go back to their homes; taking a shuttle in the third day and successfully flying to São Paulo; encountering heavy rain in the Brazilian domestic flight; waiting on the plane as it landed in another city and later successfully landed at their destination. Group B (Amber, Alexis and Julie) missed their domestic flight connection, stayed overnight in São Paulo, and initially were unable to contact course instructor.</p>	<p>This was the students' first trip to Brazil, and South America, and they all expanded repertoires of problem-solving actions when engaging with disruptions in traveling expectations.</p> <p>Cindy and Cristina did not have a repertory of alternative actions and contingency plans for the new, unexpected situations encountered in local airports. They negotiated unexpected situations with their known literacy and cultural repertoires of international traveling, and dealt with multiple levels of frustration and thoughts of not going to Brazil. Amber, Alexis and Julie's prior repertoire of international traveling helped them turn their disruptions into immediate opportunities to explore a new city and rich points: multiple attempts to figure out the phone system at the hotel, ordering a meal and trying new foods, and going shopping at a nearby mall and navigating the store clerks' communication and interaction styles.</p>

texts. They were able to see and question airline practices as well as Brazilian informal practices of everyday life in their own context and terms, and juxtapose them with their own practices and expectations. For example, Cindy stated in a Quickwrite in day 8 of the international experience:

Culture is what a person is . . . it is how a person communicates, reacts, eats, and interacts. Here, I have realized that culture is more about who a person is than about how a person is. When culture was striking to me, it was when something strongly contradicted who I am, and even made me question either my practice or theirs.

Group B (Amber, Alexis, and Julie) experience of disruption of flight plans immediately became a rich point and opportunity to explore new surroundings. It indicates Amber, Alexis and Julie's expectations of delays in connecting flights at a different country. Although group A and B experiences and repertoire of actions were different, their situations challenged their ability to negotiate disruptions of the ordinary and develop new repertoire of actions. Further, the course's ethnographic perspective provided a language to make visible, examine and interpret frame clashes.

#### ***Building and Transforming Understandings of Culture and Literacy Practices***

This section examines two students' processes of transforming understanding and making visible their assumptions about culture and the relationship between culture and literacy practices. Cindy and Julie's experiences and reflections show different levels of transformed cultural understandings. They were also at different places in their teaching careers: Julie was a prospective teacher, and Cindy was a new teacher with four years of classroom experience.

Julie and Cindy's experiences illustrate the process of being in a strange environment, without knowing the language and a repertory of frames to read what counts as mainstream academic knowledge. Being away of their ordinary contexts forced them to ask new questions and observe other evidences of families and communities' knowledge and cultural and literacy practices. The situated learning experience in an international context prompted Julie to articulate her understanding of culture in relation to her own history. As shown in table 2, Julie moved from

**Table 2.**  
**Building and Transforming Understandings: Two Examples.**

Students	Julie	Cindy
Building Cultural Understandings	FROM Culture as a Theoretical Construct and Uncommon Other TO My Culture as Solid Traditions and Rich Heritage	FROM Culture as a Theoretical Construct TO Culture as a Form of Empowerment
The Relationship between Culture and Literacy	FROM Literacy as a Theoretical Construct TO Seeing the Close Intersection between Literacy and Students' Cultural Practices and Funds of Knowledge	FROM Theoretical Understanding and Recognition of Traditional and Non-Traditional Literacies as Part of a Universal Culture TO Building Understanding in the Action of Seeing and Experiencing Literacies' Embeddedness in Culture

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an understanding of culture as a theoretical construct and uncommon, exotic other to recognizing her own culture as having solid traditions and rich heritage.

During the last debriefing session in Brazil, Julie looked confused and questioned her identity as a cultural being: “I realize that I don’t have a culture like the buddies and all we saw . . .” (Fieldnotes, Day 8, Debriefing Session, Brazil). As part of one of the final course assignments, I recommended Julie explore these issues. The “seeing firsthand” and engaging with insiders and members of particular cultures provided a space for dialogue involving her prior theoretical understandings from coursework and making sense of her own history in relation to experienced cultural and literacy practices of Brazil’s Northeast region. Later on, at her follow-up interview, Julie explained:

. . . [Based on] What my parents did have us do and learn about . . . I realize that we have a lot of solid traditions and very rich heritage. I never thought I did before, so that was really amazing. . . . I didn’t realize that I actually have a culture. I never thought about it that way before and seeing the difference, I realized how much I do have a culture. Even that I would definitely be seen to have a culture by someone from another culture, too, so it goes both ways. It was interesting to see, how many types of families, backgrounds and heritages [in Brazil]. There are a lot of similarities, too, but then the differences are pretty big in certain ways, but still just really interesting.

Both Julie and Cindy’s levels of transformed understanding were unexpected findings due to their prior traveling experiences, openness to dialogue on diversity issues, and successful ability to articulate theoretical constructs on diversity, funds of knowledge, and sociocultural perspectives in a prior course. The situated learning context moved Cindy into new levels of understanding and conceptual change from culture as a theoretical construct to culture as a form of empowerment:

. . . now looking back on it, I think that I felt like culture was something that [I] would kind of bring into the classroom through maybe a read-aloud or . . . acknowledge it maybe on special holidays or something, have the children talk about it, but it was never something that I thought of as something that could empower the students. I almost thought of it as something as kind of, I don’t like to admit this, but as something to overcome like, you know they have all of these cultural things—especially some that maybe we view as negative with the low socio-economic status of my students, which I think is a culture. But now . . . I really am trying . . . to get to know my students and then see all of the funds of knowledge and all of the experiences they can bring and try to build upon those rather than just, oh you know they don’t have books in their house so they obviously don’t know how to read. . . . (Follow-up Interview)

Intrinsic to Julie and Cindy’s transformed cultural understandings was their acquisition of a new language and strategies of inquiry, and “being there” in ongoing dialogue with locals. As Julie explained in a follow up interview: “I studied abroad twice, in college twice in Florence and then in London. I have been exposed to cultures other than my own, but . . . Brazil was just different . . . I’d never been to South America . . . and just seeing it from . . . the point of view of the locals more

than as a tourist . . . and experiencing . . . [being] able to see things that you wouldn't normally see."

Julie and Cindy's engagement in/with different cultural and literacy practices in an international context promoted a deeper understanding of the relationship between culture and literacy, and changes in instruction. Julie provides specific examples of the impact of seeing first hand to her ability to truly understand multiple literacies and its implications:

. . . I definitely didn't realize how close they [literacy and culture] were together . . . but then seeing it first hand. And how much more literacy really is. The classes I have taken in the program, but also in Brazil, the classes opened my mind to it, but then the course in Brazil actually made me see it and it was like a living example of it really. For instance, the fisherman village, . . . those kids have a completely different world than us . . . but then if you put them in the same classroom then of course they learn differently and have different views of what things mean in what they read . . . It's just how . . . seeing it firsthand the variety of funds of knowledge because of their family . . . that makes such a difference. And the literacy, just watching the kids in all those dances they knew, I mean. . . Everyone has, I guess, every culture has things . . . that they do more as their day-to-day life that affects their learning. . . It definitely led me to see that even she [her private student] with her disabilities, has a lot, there are things that she knows and there are things that interest her and I always try to tie them together and just think about things she experienced growing up and where she's been and what she's done with her life and what she likes to do and try to focus on those things. It's definitely made a difference with ways I can get her more fluent or, just different ways she's literate.

Cindy's level of critical analysis led to important changes in her relationship with students' families, and in her understanding and ability to see their funds of knowledge. Her follow-up actions and revision of instructional goals provide rich examples of educational changes from deeper understanding and critical examination of students' sociocultural and linguistic capital:

It was kind of my goal this year to make myself a partner with the parents. I've always said that that was something important to me, you know, "call me anytime," but I wasn't really as necessarily as proactive as I could have been. . . . So I didn't wait until conference time to meet with them, I called them all within the first month and just talked to them about their family and about, "What are your goals for your students?" "What do you do at home?" And if they said, "I don't have any books at home," it's like okay then "What other kind of literacies do you do?" . . . I've also really made an effort to call them—I made five or six phone calls every week, to just check up and see how it was going and give them an update of what we're doing in the classroom. It really became a partnership . . . [and] they are really involved. Even when I left [for maternity leave] they still felt like they should be really involved. I feel like they wouldn't have done that before. . . . (Follow up Interview)

## **Building Teacher Cultural Competency To Work with Diverse Learners**

Multicultural research has challenged mainstream academic knowledge, stereotypes and misconceptions, and made apparent the extensive range of experiences within ethnically, racially and culturally diverse groups (Banks, in press). Both multicultural research and education reason the need for teachers to acquire and integrate knowledge of student development, individual differences and academic abilities, cultural contexts, language, and pedagogy to effectively teach the growing wide range of diverse groups within U.S. classrooms (Banks, in press; Banks et al., 2005). Intercultural and study-abroad experiences within a sociocultural frame offer another context to prepare teachers by building their: awareness of (subtle) beliefs and stereotypes about diverse learners' differences and abilities; understanding of the arbitrariness of perceived cultural norms; and competency as "cultural workers" (Freire, 1998) or "cultural brokers" (Gay, 1993) who advocate and build bridges with/for culturally, linguistically and/or socioeconomic diverse student populations and their families.

The six teacher education students experienced the process of learning to "read the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987), the situated practices of a particular state located in Brazil's Northeast region, to read the word within "the social and cultural conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and/or writing" (Street, 1995, p. 2) and other forms of literacy. Students had to learn to read a world that did not fit their expectations, which made visible their invisible assumptions of cultural norms and beliefs. Yet, as Banks et al. (2005) explains, "Community experiences in and of themselves are not necessarily educative, however. What makes them so are opportunities for students to reflect on and challenge initial assumptions they carry with them into the field. Undoing prior assumptions is an important part of this process of learning how to teach children who are not one's own" (p. 265). Thus, a sociocultural, situated approach and ethnographic perspective provide a way of envisioning community interactions as ordinary, reading the disruptions not as negative but as rich points, and acquiring a language to describe and juxtapose them with their own histories, experiences and expectations.

Julie's early statement, "I realize that I don't have a culture..." supports prior multicultural research in the U.S. on teacher education students' tendency to see themselves as just Americans, "monocultural beings" (Banks et al., 2005) rather than examining the "objective arbitrariness" of their assumptions (Rosaldo, 1993). Julie's experience and state of confusion illustrate opportunities available in the context of international education to disrupt the ordinary and make visible assumptions and stereotypical beliefs that impact classroom learning and instruction. Further, Julie's closer look at the impact of multiple literacies on learning illustrates the process of transformed cultural understandings as taking place in the "being there" (Rosaldo, 1993), in the action of constant clash between their way of

doing things, who they were, as “natural law” (Agar, 1994) and other ways of doing, understanding and expecting within a variety of activities that serve as guides to others’ conduct and interpretation (Goodenough, 1993). Making visible invisible assumptions increased the students’ ability to negotiate disruptions of the ordinary throughout the trip, make visible other ways of doing in their teaching context, and develop new repertoire of actions.

Figure 1 provides a framework to examine the process of building teacher cultural competency in teacher education programs as moving through levels of understanding and conceptual change. Looking into diversity begins in teacher education methods courses through exposure and examination of multicultural theories and practices, and use of pedagogical approaches involving situated learning in local school and community contexts, and opportunities for reflection and examination of beliefs and assumptions about self and others. Teachers working on a master’s degree encounter new opportunities to look at and examine diversity and sociocultural perspectives. In addition, aspects of the other two levels of understanding, looking closer and moving into action, may take place in teacher education courses. However, Julie and Cindy’s examples support the importance of theoretical consistency across courses within a program of study and situated, guided learning opportunities in order to promote change in action. Julie and Cindy’s transformed understandings involved acquiring a language to examine frame clashes; participating in situated learning experiences in an international context and moving through discomfort; and guided, active exploration of different communities’ funds of knowledge, and cultural and literacy practices.

Developing a critical “sociocultural consciousness” enables teachers to see themselves as cultural beings and develop multiple perspectives in which their worldview is not universal or the right way but it is “greatly influenced by their life experiences and aspects of their cultural, gender, race, ethnicity, and social-class background” (Banks et al., 2005, p. 253). Experiential learning in international contexts is a means of invoking a deeper understanding of self, culture and literacy practices, and exploration of ways to use this knowledge for educational change. It places teacher education students in their own students’ daily realities as second language learners and cultural learners. Thus understanding is built in action through engagement in/with the “other,” and ongoing interpretation and juxtaposing of assumptions and beliefs within out-of-ordinary intertextual and cross-national spaces.

Without close examination of their cultural identity(ies) and literacy practices and the resources available in the funds of knowledge of different families/communities, teacher education students are at risk of perpetuating deficit views and misconceptions of diverse students and their families’ resources and abilities. This study provides rich examples of how the context of international education, within a carefully developed theoretical framework and embedded within a



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**Figure 1.**  
**Building Teacher Cultural Competency To Work with Diverse Learners:**  
**Moving through Levels of Understanding and Conceptual Change**

Looking into Diversity:

First Examinations of Literature, Expectations, Beliefs & Personal History

- ◆ Exposure to multicultural education theories and practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, and sociocultural theories on literacy as social practices
- ◆ Culture as a theoretical construct: Use of contrastive approaches to examine culture as a conceptual system representing particular communities
- ◆ Gaining understanding of self, cultural identities through pedagogical approaches such as short autobiographies and personal testimonials
- ◆ Experiencing and reacting to cognitive dissonance or new ways of seeing self and other

Looking Closer:

Making Visible Invisible Assumptions

- ◆ Expanding inert knowledge within situated learning experiences
- ◆ Acquiring ethnographic lens as a tool to examine disruptions and associated discomfort
- ◆ Understanding disruptions of the ordinary as frame clashes that make visible own and other assumptions and cultural norms, and bring awareness and places of dialogue
- ◆ Closely examining expectations, definitions and participants taking part in frame clashes
- ◆ Deeper understanding of self and own set of arbitrary norms and beliefs
- ◆ Seeing in action multiple literacies associated to specific social practices in school, family and community contexts

Moving into Action:

Turning Frame Clashes into Rich Points

- ◆ Deeper understanding of culture and cultural identities as a dynamic, fluid, multifaceted construct
- ◆ Deeper understanding of the relationship between culture, learning and literacies
- ◆ Transforming understandings into action: Developing a repertoire of actions to negotiate disruptions
- ◆ Ongoing examination of disruptions as rich points: frame clashes seen as entry spaces to learn about self/students/families and investigate effective ways to support learning
- ◆ Bridging into the curriculum diverse learners' cultural identities and literacy practices as ways to contextualize instruction and empower students
- ◆ Continued change and transformed understandings on the nature of knowledge and sociocultural, intellectual capital

program of study, can build teacher cultural competence and transformed understandings about their own cultural identities and its impact on literacy practices and educational processes.

## **Opportunities Available in the Context of International Education**

There has been an extensive discussion about the need for reflective practice beyond a focus on theory or practice but a continuous dialogue and knowledge in action (Banks et al., 2005; Leistyna, 2004). Emerging pedagogies, such as the work of Moll and colleagues (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; McIntyre et al., 2001; Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992), Frank (1999) and Jennings (1998), provide rich contexts for teacher educators to promote deeper understanding of self, culture, learning, and literacy practices. International activities, as a site in which the conflict of cultures is intrinsic to the experience, offer resonant contexts for exploration of and engagement in/with these pedagogies.

It is important to note that building deeper understanding of diversity issues goes beyond taking a group of teachers to a new and international context. This particular international experience offers a framework, grounded in an ethnographic perspective and funds-of-knowledge approach that builds teacher education students' cultural competence through experiential learning and understanding of self, cultural identities, unexamined deficit views, and culture and literacy practices in the context of cross-national and intercultural experiences. For instance, Julie's extensive international experiences were not enough to disrupt the ordinary without a guiding frame to examine cultural clashes and make theory-practice connections. Similarly, consistency across a program of study provides continuity in theory-practice exploration and opportunities to further examine situated learning experiences, such as the discussed international experiences, beyond the short duration of the course. Cindy and Julie's ability to make theory-practice connections required exposure to theoretical constructs and development of conceptual knowledge across their graduate courses. However, in-depth analysis of frame clashes within situated learning experiences in an international context, and opportunities to further examine them in the course assignments and additional graduate activities took them to the next level of transformed understandings into action.

Teacher preparation and professional development, and teacher effectiveness when working with a culturally, linguistically and/or socioeconomic diverse student population require exploration of cultural issues, deficit beliefs, and a broader definition of literacy. Teachers' realities are challenging, with current pressure on high-stakes testing and specific and often narrow content standards. The language of standards and accountability, the disconnect between teachers' daily experiences and their students' lives, and negative, often subtle, stereotypes also restrict their ability to envision and creatively integrate and bridge students' funds of knowledge into traditional academic knowledge and curricula. What becomes invisible, disconnected from classroom curriculum and learning, is a large and intrinsic part of diverse students' lives and prior knowledge. Or, as Cindy maintained, they become something to overcome rather than to empower students.

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Situated learning experiences, within international contexts and guided by socio-cultural orienting theories, offer opportunities for examination of deficit beliefs about students' abilities and sociocultural and intellectual capital. Thus, they provide a frame to make visible cultural and multiple literacy practices in and out of the classroom and across contexts, and for teachers to engage in/with rich spaces that disrupt ordinary assumptions and require the development of new repertoire of actions.

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