



**Education, Truancy, Dropout & Literacy Subcommittee
School Relevancy Workgroup
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This packet contains handouts that were distributed at the Education, Truancy, Dropout & Literacy Subcommittee's School Relevancy Workgroup meeting on February 08, 2008 and includes the following item:

- *Kappa Delta Pi Record* article, "Confessions of a Teacher"

Confessions of an

Awful
Teacher

The Impact of Culture
Shock on Teaching
in Low-Performing
Schools

by Cheryl McClean Larson



A few years back, I was walking through the halls of a school identified by its district as low-performing. Looking over the half-walls into classrooms on either side, I saw students in rows, heads down, quietly completing worksheets. Suddenly, a yell broke the silence. I turned and saw a teacher shrieking reprimands at a young student. The halls echoed with the teacher's shrill voice, but no one else appeared to take note.



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As I sat in the classroom down the hall, I cringed as the screams came again and again. Later, I angrily vented to a friend about the inappropriateness of what I had seen and heard. However, as I think back to this situation, I find that I now have more questions than accusations. It was easy to assume that this was an ineffective teacher—and maybe she was. But perhaps there was more to this story.

The Need for Change

Teachers at low-performing schools show up day after day to deal with school cultures, student needs, and stresses that their colleagues in other schools don't have to face. In addition, they often are subjected to bad press, accusations, and chastisements because of their students' low test scores. Statistically, this hard-working group of teachers includes a disproportionate number of inexperienced, under-qualified, and ineffective teachers (U.S. Department of Education 2004; Darling-Hammond 2001). These teachers care, work late hours,

and teach the best way they know how.

Rather than assigning blame or denigrating teachers working in these schools, the Learning First Alliance (2005), made up of 12 professional teaching organizations, developed a framework for addressing the vicious staffing cycle that makes it difficult for these schools to retain and recruit qualified personnel. The goal of the Alliance is to make "low-performing schools the kinds of places where our best educators will want to work" (Learning First Alliance 2005, 2).

This is not an easy task. In North Carolina, the Superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is threatening to require the system's most experienced teachers to move to high-poverty schools if financial incentives alone don't work. Ninety-four percent of the members of a local teachers' association are opposed to the plan, and nearly 80 percent say they might leave the district if they are forced to work in a low-performing school (Servatius 2005). Instead of acknowledging their concerns, a local official attacked the

teachers, claiming that they lack dedication because they aren't willing to teach where they are needed (Servatius 2005).

The solution does not lie in forcing teachers to be where they don't want to be, criticizing teachers who hesitate to move, and labeling teachers who are considering leaving as quitters. Getting at the answer requires looking at the conditions that cause dedicated and thoughtful teachers to refuse to teach, to leave the students who need them most, or to become—or appear to become—incompetent teachers.

The need to analyze the conditions at low-performing schools is very real to me, because I faced these conditions myself. After I had accrued teaching experiences at the elementary, middle, and college levels in schools in the Midwest, Burkina Faso, and Singapore, I was ready for the next challenge. So, I accepted a lead teacher position in a Title I school in the South. Confident that my working class background and experience with diverse students would help, I set out to face the daily joys and challenges of this new environment.

Somewhere along the way, however, I fell into ineffectiveness—becoming a controlling, punitive, and stressed-out teacher. Reflecting on the experience, I understood how the pressures could challenge a teacher's dedication and extinguish his or her enthusiasm. Yet, how could a career educator change into someone that children call an "awful" teacher? I couldn't figure out how I had become the "screamer" I had once criticized.

The Fall into Ineffectiveness

My first year at the Title I school had its stresses, but I had considered my efforts successful. I was able to integrate units, individualize instruction, and introduce new learning strategies with the support of my team and the administration.

My second year, however, was much different. Teachers, parents,

administrators, and even the custodians commented on the needs of my students. The first part of that year, I worked to identify and address those needs. Eventually, though, the stress began to build. By late autumn, my

on two district committees, and two children at home, I didn't have time to step back and clearly see what was happening.

I returned after winter break, hopeful and determined to persevere.

"I knew that the Title I environment would be different, but had not even considered that I might experience culture shock."

students weren't learning and behaving as I expected. Worst of all, I had not been able to develop the level of community I anticipated. Students didn't listen. They talked in the hallway and failed to complete work. They picked fights, lied, and stole things. I had faced all of these situations before, but I somehow was no longer able to work through them.

I cared deeply, took responsibility for my students' learning, set realistic standards, and worked with my colleagues to plan effective lessons. I was doing everything I knew to do, but nothing was working. My expectations were high, and my past successes tormented rather than supported me. What more did I need to do?

The weight of my responsibility was leading to sleepless nights. I kept searching for answers. I read current research and conferred with my colleagues. Much of what I ascertained simply reiterated what I already knew, and some of it didn't fit with my philosophy of teaching. "Keep them in for recess more." "Give them fewer choices." "Stop doing so much group work." "Use rows." It was confusing. I needed more time to think. But with a full teaching day, papers to correct, lessons to develop, responsibilities

When my principal asked how it was going, I replied, "Great!" We were making progress, but not enough. There were still too many interruptions and disagreements; we were losing instructional time.

One January morning, a district administrator came to visit my classroom. The note she left was complimentary, but called attention to my "very active class." This innocuous comment, as well as the follow-up observations to determine whether or not team classes should be balanced differently, felt like announcements of my incompetence. Obviously, I couldn't handle my students. To me, it was clear that I was an "awful" teacher.

Less than two weeks later, my desks were arranged in rows; I was marking multiple transgressions on the discipline chart and keeping many children inside during recess; and my voice was much louder than it ever should have been. My remarks and actions were full of contradictions. I heard myself first blaming the students, and subsequently defending them.

Crying almost every night, I told my father that I hated teaching, though I knew I wouldn't do anything else. I ignored my inner pleas to ask for a mentor. "Stop whining," I told myself.

Yet, I began to worry that I might be hurting my students rather than helping them. Doubt weakened my foundation and perpetuated my transgressions. Of course, my students didn't need rows, marks, and yelling to be successful. They didn't need this useless teacher I had become. They needed me, but I wasn't there for them.

After watching my class community fall apart, seeing the frustration and distrust in my students' eyes, and not being able to look myself in the mirror, I said, "This has got to stop!" I went back to letting my teaching philosophy guide my decisions. I began to listen differently to my students' concerns, noticed more details in their actions, and understood more of the hidden messages in their words. During an

observation, a district administrator remarked, "Do you know what these kids need? One more year with you!" I smiled, realizing that I had learned a great deal during my fall into ineffectiveness. Nonetheless, I'll never forget having lost my students' trust—and trust in myself as well.

The Discovery: It's Culture Shock!

To discern what had happened to me took a long time. The source of my difficulties could not be attributed, in large part, to the children, the parents, the administration, or my colleagues. That left only me. I questioned my dedication, my beliefs, and my competence; but they weren't the problem.

After talking with a colleague from

Singapore, I believe that I've figured it out. What I had experienced might be described as culture shock. The inevitable impact of culture shock has long been recognized by international educators and businesses (Suutari and Brewster 1998). I had dealt with it in Africa and Singapore, but then I had been warned about it, expected it, and had been helped through it.

Here, I had been caught off guard. I was at a school in my home country, minutes from my home. I knew that the Title I environment would be different, but had not even considered that I might experience culture shock. I had forgotten that the shock is often more pronounced when cultures are more similar than not (Franko 1971). The school environment appeared so familiar, yet it functioned in very different ways. I thought I knew the culture of my students—but I didn't.

How to Respond to Culture Shock

- Realize that practically everyone faces it. It's natural and not a sign you're deficient.
 - Be ready for the lessons that culture shock teaches—for example, no one culture possesses the best way of providing for human needs.
 - Know thy host community. Pursue your information gathering assiduously.
 - Look for logical reasons behind everything that seems strange, difficult, or confusing.
 - Try to trace every "strange" action you observe in your new culture to its underlying value(s).
 - Make a list of all the positive things you can identify about the situation.
 - Don't succumb to the temptation of disparaging the host culture.
 - Maintain a good sense of humor. Be ready to laugh at your cultural gaffes. Laughter is one of the best antidotes to culture shock.
 - Avoid people that are in a permanent state of culture shock.
 - Find someone who has gone through culture shock and has a positive attitude, and use this person as a sounding board.
 - Make friends with someone from the host culture. Try to develop a deeper relationship. Present some of the problems you are having, but take care not to sound critical of the culture.
 - Keep busy; stay active. Don't sit around and feel sorry for yourself.
 - During deepest plunges into culture shock, take a trip. Get away to a scenic spot. Take time for yourself away from the community.
 - When looking for advice, focus on how you are feeling rather than on what you think are the causes of your problems.
 - Even during the worst times, have faith that you will work your way through culture shock to the brighter days that lie ahead.
- Adapted from Kohls (2001)

The Progression of Culture Shock

Kohls (2001, 91) defined culture shock as "the term used to describe the more pronounced reactions to the psychological disorientation most people experience when they move for an extended period of time into a culture markedly different from their own." Oberg (1960), who was first credited with diagnosing culture shock, identified four distinct phases—with which I can relate:

- During the first, or *honeymoon phase*, the new culture is exciting and differences are stimulating. After the initial euphoria, the mysterious sets of new norms eventually lead to unease and, at times, more debilitating frustrations.
- Then, the newcomers hit the *rejection phase*, where the glow of newness fades and reveals unpleasant realities. Symptoms of this phase include changes in temperament, depression, and feelings of powerlessness. People

can lose confidence, feel inadequate, and even lose their sense of identity.

- After the *rejection phase*, some people move into the regression phase. They pull back from the new culture to a position of safety, close themselves off, and idealize their home culture.
- Most people eventually move into the *recovery phase*, where they gradually adjust to the new culture. In this phase, people begin to recognize and interpret subtle social cues, adapt, and eventually become bicultural as they accept and appreciate the unique qualities of the new culture.

As I look back, I can see clearly my progression through each phase. My first autumn as a lead teacher was the honeymoon, when everything seemed possible. It wasn't until spring that new layers of challenge moved me into the beginning of the rejection phase. During the late autumn of my second year, the symptoms of culture shock began to surface. My tried-and-true strategies were not working. I didn't understand how my students communicated with one another, how they felt about school and their future, the behavior they needed to survive in their neighborhoods, the issues they faced daily, and what they expected of me. I didn't really know their culture.

I emotionally snapped and went into full-fledged regression when I received the administrator's note. I pulled back to a position of safety. In my case, the stereotypical culture of the classroom—with the teacher in control and the students quiet in their seats—seemed safe. Thankfully, I worked through the low point and began the move to biculturalism.

I now realize that when I was in regression, my classroom looked much like “the screamer’s” and oth-

ers I have observed. In regression, teachers might retreat to a position of safety similar to my experience—with loud voices, worksheets, and rows. Eventually, that orientation may become their status quo. I've heard people say, “He didn't used to teach like that!” and I've wondered whether the teaching choices might be uncharacteristic responses to cultural stress. Such forced duplicity can be difficult on educators. I know good teachers who have left their schools—not because they cared too little or gave up, but because they cared so much that eventually the stress pushed them away.

Earlier this year, a teacher who had successfully taught in a low-performing school for six years called me crying. As she described the situations she faced, I empathized with her frustration and disillusionment. Once the cultural dissonance began to affect her physically and mentally, she transferred to another school. Her new job didn't take her away from the needy students she cared so much about; rather, it provided intense professional development and support for identifying and addressing their individual needs. Since my experience, I've heard many such stories.

Culture shock has a powerful effect on teachers, regardless of their race, background, or level of experience. It reaches across schools, districts, and states. However, its impact is felt particularly in low-performing schools because of the differences between teacher and student cultures—and the need to keep effective teachers where they are needed most.

The Potential Solution

Because international educators recognize that working in a new culture can be overwhelming, they involve new hires in the local cul-

ture and support them through the phases of culture shock. If we follow the lead of our overseas colleagues, this effective preparation and support would include helping professionals understand culture shock and cultural differences while experiencing the invigorating effects of biculturalism. The Learning First Alliance (2005) is taking a step in this direction by calling for effective preparation, more professional support, and appropriate incentives to attract and retain highly qualified staff at low-performing schools.

Knowing that her new job would help her understand the culture of her students was a great incentive to my young friend. Even just recognizing my own culture shock earlier would have helped me. With some preparation and support, we both could have had a better chance of encouraging student learning while enjoying our work.

When I walk through a school now and see children in rows and hear a teacher screaming, I don't assume that she cares too little. Rather, I wonder whether she cares so much that doubt is creeping in and that cultural differences have brought about an overwhelming level of stress. Perhaps she is not the “awful” teacher she appears to be; she has just lost herself. I believe that cultural understanding is a way to bring her back. ■

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