One Student at a Time: The Cultural Inquiry Process

Evelyn Jacob, Barbara K. Johnson, Janell Finley, Jeffrey C. Gurski & Richard S. Lavine

Preeti was an outsider. When her team of eighth grade teachers met early in the school year to identify puzzlements about their new group of students, Preeti's name came up several times. She seemed to have trouble understanding assignments. Her grades were low. She did not associate with other students. The team wondered how Preeti, newly arrived from India, was dealing with the stress of adjusting to American life and whether her serene and withdrawn demeanor might be masking some problems.

Observations and questions about Preeti led the team to develop cultural hypotheses about what might be influencing her behavior. They thought that different cultural expectations in Indian and American schools, gender norms, or language ability might be involved.

To gather further information the team decided to interview Preeti. The team's resource teacher conducted two open-ended interviews with her. Team members chose not to confer with Preeti's parents to avoid alarming them.

During the interviews Preeti and the teacher discussed aspects of Indian culture and Preeti's views on her school experiences. Preeti's family had recently given up prestigious positions in India to come to America for the benefit of their children. This sacrifice was never far from Preeti's mind. Preeti told about Sikh cultural practices in religion, dress, and marriage. She also talked about her experiences in Indian schools, explaining that students take difficult Board Examinations in India and that the cost of school is high there compared to public education in the United States.

Preeti discussed her grades: "My parents say it is OK because I tried my best....My parents really believe in me and my sister." She also discussed her interactions with her peers:

I want to mix up here because I have to live here all my life....My parents say that it is up to us....The kids don't like me [and] laugh behind my back....I would like someone to talk to, but they make excuses.

To the team's surprise, Preeti "blossomed" after the interviews. She was pleased that her teachers were interested in her culture, and the formerly quiet student became more animated and outgoing. In retrospect, the team realized that asking Preeti about her culture and her perspective on her school experiences on a one-to-one basis conveyed to her that her teachers respected and were interested in her and her culture. In fact, Preeti reported to a teacher after the first interview that her mother was "so happy that someone is interested in us."

Because Preeti herself expressed a desire to have closer friendships with her peers, the team of teachers extended the intervention by purposely pairing Preeti

_Evelyn Jacob teaches at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia._
_Barbara K. Johnson taught at Rocky Run Middle School, Chantilly, Virginia. She is currently at the National Science Resource Center, Washington, D.C._
_Janell Finley teaches at Rocky Run Middle School, Chantilly, Virginia._
_Jeffrey C. Gurski teaches at Rocky Run Middle School, Chantilly, Virginia._
_Richard S. Lavine is Principal of Rocky Run Middle School, Chantilly, Virginia._
with outgoing and accepting students. Her eighth grade peers soon began to acknowledge her and ask her questions. She began participating more in classes, and her grades significantly improved.

The team continued to monitor Preeti's performance throughout the year. During the spring, Preeti failed to complete a major social studies assignment. In discussing this incident, the team realized that students from nonmainstream cultures may not have easy access to American newspapers and magazines, which the assignment required. To make sure that access was not an barrier for Preeti, the team arranged for the media specialist to introduce Preeti to media services available at the school.

As the year progressed, with the help of continuous support from her parents and teachers, Preeti began to see the results of her efforts. She blossomed academically, achieving As on her report card. According to Preeti:

School is a totally different world for me now.... I feel really different, happy, and proud of myself. It was really hard for me to be this. I did it because I wanted to be successful and make my parents proud of myself....I am very thankful to all my teachers. They have helped me whenever I had a problem and they all were there for me when I needed them.

Preeti received more attention and acceptance from the other students. She said, "They came to me, talked to me, and asked me to join their group." Preeti's circle of friends had expanded, and she found the fun and accep-

tance she missed at the beginning of the year.

This vignette of the Cultural Inquiry Process occurred as part of a collaboration between Rocky Run Middle School, Fairfax County Public Schools, and Professor Evelyn Jacob, an educational anthropologist at George Mason University. The remainder of the article discusses the Cultural Inquiry Process, describes our experiences using it, and addresses how others can use this process.

The cultural inquiry process

The Cultural Inquiry Process is a way to broaden teachers' understandings of culturally diverse students and to maximize these students' success. Figure 1 outlines its basic steps.

After selecting a focus student or group, teachers first identify their "puzzlements" about the student(s) and what they already know about the student(s). Puzzlements may include problems, concerns, or student behaviors or attitudes that teachers do not understand. Identifying what is known about a student or group involves teachers' sharing their observations, information from school records, and classroom work. In Preeti's case teachers were concerned about her classroom performance and her isolation from her peers. Because Preeti was new to the school system, the team initially knew very little about her except their classroom observations.

After identifying their puzzlements and reviewing what they know about a focus student or group, teachers develop and consider alternative cultural hypotheses—i.e., ideas about cultural factors that might be influencing a student's behavior. Teachers can derive cultural hypotheses from their background knowledge, from anthropological studies, and from other sources such as professional journals and the media. Cultures that may affect students include the student's home culture(s), school culture(s), peer culture(s), community culture(s), and the interactions among these cultures. From a cultural perspective, a student's behavior or attitudes might be influenced by institutional norms, the student's definitions of school and succeeding in school, conflicts between the cultures of the student's world, differences in patterns of expected social interaction, messages in school artifacts such as texts and bulletin boards, features of the instructional context, and power relations in the school or community.
In Preeti’s case, the team developed several hypotheses over the school year. Because of Preeti’s recent arrival in the United States, the team initially hypothesized that cultural expectations from Preeti’s home culture about school or gender norms, or problems with English, might be influencing her behavior. However, these issues did not appear to be major contributors to her difficulties. Preeti’s comments in the open-ended interviews suggested that she felt isolated and that her culture was neither understood nor respected by her teachers. Later in the year, the team hypothesized that she did not have easy access to cultural artifacts (mainstream newspapers and magazines) that an assignment required. These hypotheses proved fruitful.

After framing a cultural hypothesis, teachers then gather and analyze relevant information as needed. Qualitative research methods (e.g., Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Hubbard & Power, 1993), which are common to classroom inquiry and which try to minimize the impact of teachers’ preconceptions, are particularly useful. It is important that the person collecting the information take a “learner” stance to try to understand a student’s perspectives and experiences. In Preeti’s case, a teacher on her team conducted two open-ended interviews with Preeti and reviewed her records. The teacher wrote a summary of the interviews to share with the team.

Drawing upon the information gathered to explore their cultural hypotheses, teachers develop and implement interventions as needed. Ideas for interventions can come from anthropological “success stories” (Jacob, 1995), from other readings, and from teachers’ experiences. In Preeti’s case, the interviews constituted the initial intervention, although the team did not conduct them for that purpose. An intended intervention involved asking a student leader in Preeti’s classes to reach out to her.

Teachers monitor the results of their interventions, and then cycle back through the earlier steps as needed. In Preeti’s case, the team went through a second cycle of the process when they noticed that, after her earlier improvement, she failed to complete a major assignment. This intervention involved facilitating Preeti’s access to cultural resources needed for the assignment.

**Rationale**

Jacob (1995) developed the Cultural Inquiry Process to improve the education of culturally diverse students by making the knowledge of educational anthropology useful to teachers. To this end, she drew on Schon’s (1983, 1987) ideas on reflective practice to combine classroom inquiry with principles from educational anthropology. While the classroom inquiry process provides the basic framework, educational anthropology provides ideas for cultural hypotheses, culturally sensitive methods of data collection and analysis, and ideas for interventions.

Schon (1983, 1987) provided a rationale for combining classroom inquiry and the principles of educational anthropology. He argued that competent practitioners develop tacit knowledge—ways of thinking about people, situations, and problems—that informs their practice. Schon pointed out that when practitioners encounter new people, situations, or problems that fail to meet their expectations, three possibilities arise. They may ignore the surprise, force it into preexisting categories, or use it as an opportunity to reflect and explore new categories.

In education, teachers’ tacit knowledge is heavily informed by the assumptions and categories of psychology, which has developed primarily from studies of Euro-Americans and which focuses on individual psychological factors rather than cultural factors. Because culturally diverse students often present teachers with puzzles that may have cultural roots, Jacob developed a process to help teachers identify their puzzles, consciously consider cultural ways of “framing” these puzzles, and explore new ways of addressing their educational dilemmas. Through this approach, the Cultural Inquiry Process seeks not only to help teachers improve the education of focus students or groups but also to
provide teachers with new ideas and approaches they can use in the future in culturally diverse classrooms.

The Cultural Inquiry Process complements other approaches to understanding and helping culturally diverse students. Many multicultural workshops provide general information about particular cultures. A critique of this approach is that it ignores variations within cultures and may not be an accurate portrayal of a particular local community or individual. Teachers using the Cultural Inquiry Process do not take general information about a student's culture as an explanation of the student's behavior; instead, they use it to develop hypotheses about possible influences on a student. In a similar way, teachers using the Cultural Inquiry Process can draw on the traditional psychological approaches widely used in education to understand students. Hypotheses about psychological factors influencing the student can be considered along with cultural hypotheses in the Cultural Inquiry Process.

**Our experiences using the cultural inquiry process**

Teams at Rocky Run Middle School met every other week over the school year with Professor Jarrah to learn and implement the Cultural Inquiry Process. The first year, one team piloted the process; the second year, four teams chose to participate. Counselors, parent liaisons (community members from diverse cultural backgrounds), and a social worker joined the teams as needed.

Each team started the school year using the process with one student. As a team's work with a student moved into the monitoring stage, they added another student. Teams found it best to consider one student at a time in their meetings and to keep written "minutes" of each meeting. The minutes included summaries of team discussions under headings for each step in the process: puzzles and concerns, information already known, hypotheses, information gathered, interventions, and results.

The project members found that working as a team enhanced the Cultural Inquiry Process. Team members shared information, brainstormed ideas, and coordinated interventions. They built on one another's strengths.

Meeting regularly throughout the school year was helpful because it required an ongoing commitment to the process. The longer time frame provided more time for followup, more effective monitoring, and time to grow.

*The Role of the Anthropologist.* Professor Jacob facilitated team meetings, listened carefully to teachers' comments, asked questions, helped formulate hypotheses, suggested possible sources of relevant information (such as anthropological articles), and offered possible intervention strategies. She modeled a strategy of using "search" questions: asking "I wonder if..." when suggesting cultural hypotheses, data collection strategies, and possible interventions. This became the norm for team interactions.

**Benefits of the Cultural Inquiry Process.** As Preeti's story demonstrates, the Cultural Inquiry Process can help students find success and can help teachers address their immediate instructional dilemmas.

However, the results of the Cultural Inquiry Process were not always as dramatic as occurred with Preeti. Sometimes students' behavior did not change dramatically or only changed in part. However, in all cases teachers felt that through the process they came to a greater understanding of the students.

Sometimes the lack of change may have been due, at least in part, to the complexity of factors influencing a student, many of which were beyond teachers' control. In other instances, the team was not able to continue the process because the school year ended. Two examples illustrate such instances.

The team working with Jin-Hee, a student with a Korean mother and an African American father, was concerned because she did not make consistent efforts to complete assignments and because they thought she was
not performing to her ability. Jin-Hee also was extremely quiet and withdrawn; she did not have many friends. The team considered several cultural hypotheses including that she might be experiencing conflict between her parents' cultures.

After one-on-one interviews with Jin-Hee and a home visit by a parent liaison, the team learned that Jin-Hee’s father traveled frequently and that her mother worked at night. Jin-Hee said she felt depressed at home, and she missed her father when he was away. This information led to a new hypothesis: that Jin-Hee’s school performance might be related to the repeated work-related absences of her father. Later interviews with Jin-Hee and her mother supported this idea when they revealed that Jin-Hee’s mother felt unable to help Jin-Hee with her school work and that Jin-Hee depended on her father for help.

Because the home situation was beyond their control, the team focused on trying to provide Jin-Hee additional support in classes. They successfully enlisted other students in each class to assist Jin-Hee to stay on task. The English teacher’s use of a tape recording to supplement reading of a difficult novel seemed to help Jin-Hee’s comprehension. The team encouraged her to participate in a Saturday math tutoring program, which she did.

Jin-Hee showed improvement soon after the team’s interventions began. She responded more in class, completed more assignments, and became more socially integrated with other students. However, Jin-Hee’s academic improvement was not consistent throughout the school year. In February, for example, she was doing well in social studies and English but failing math. She had stopped attending the Saturday math tutoring program.

Although Jin-Hee was only a partial success from the team’s point of view, there were changes in the teachers’ and students’ perspectives that could bear fruit in the future. The team felt that Jin-Hee realized that not only her teachers but also her peers cared about her succeeding. Moreover, the team had a far better understanding of Jin-Hee and the influences of home experiences on school achievement.

Another team worked with Ahmed, a male student born in the U.S., whose father was from Iran and whose mother was from Germany. Ahmed’s female teachers were concerned about the lack of respect he displayed toward female teachers. During the team discussions it became clear that the male teachers did not experience this same disrespect. This led to the hypothesis that culturally-based gender roles might be influencing his behavior. The team gathered information about gender roles in Iranian culture. In an interview with Ahmed, the team explored his attitudes toward school, and male and female teachers in particular. Information about his perceptions of differences between male and female teachers’ classroom discipline styles, gained through the open-ended interview, led one of his female teachers to develop an immediate (and successful) response to his disruptive classroom behavior. When his behavior disrupted a planned video presentation, the teacher chose not to single him out and confront him in class. Instead, she changed the classroom activity from a video to book work, thereby enlisting peer group pressure on Ahmed. This strategy proved to be an effective way to modify his disruptive behavior in this female teacher’s classroom, but the school year ended before this strategy could be tried in other classrooms.

The Cultural Inquiry Process also helped the teams use resources in a productive manner. For example, all the teams found parent liaisons helpful because of their insider-outsider role. Because parent liaisons were from the same or similar ethnic background as the family and known in the community, families usually felt comfortable discussing the student with them.

In an evaluation at the end of the second year, teams reported they benefited from participating in the

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Cultural Inquiry Process in several ways. They learned about the focus students. Teams gained new ways of looking at their students and realized the wide range of possible cultural influences on students. They became more aware of available resources and experienced the benefits of pooling information to get a more rounded picture of their students.

The process planted seeds that grew beyond the original focus. One teacher reported that the interviews with Prentki led her to read more about Indian culture and religions, which helped her overcome some predisposi-
tions about that culture. One team expanded its discussions of individual students to explore the inclusion of multicultural awareness in future interdisciplinary units.

Rocky Run’s principal, Dr. Richard Lavine, thought the Cultural Inquiry Process helped the teams learn about cultures from a situational perspective. As the need arose, the teams were able to focus on individual children and their needs. By structuring the process around the needs of children, the teams learned about the cultures of their students in a way that allowed them to apply their knowledge immediately. In addition, the teams were able to assess their successes and failures and to modify programs in an appropriate fashion. This approach to multiculturalism allowed for immediate feedback to teachers and for effective intervention and improved achievement for students.

Challenges in Implementing the Process. While trying to implement this approach, the project teams realized how difficult it is to get relevant cultural information quickly and easily. Most printed information about cultural groups was either out of date or not relevant to the teams’ immediate concerns.

As the teams considered various students, the anthropologist suggested articles relevant to particular cultural hypotheses, and team members shared articles they had read. For example, Fordham and Ogbru’s (1986) article and a Washington Post article (Hill, 1994), both on African American students’ concerns about “acting white,” were offered for insights when a team began exploring the hostile behavior of a male African American student. Teachers volunteered to read articles and report to the rest of the group. This volunteer approach seemed to work at Rocky Run because of the prior knowledge and experience that team members brought to the collaborative effort. However, the anthropologist wonders whether the volunteer approach would work with teams with less prior knowledge or experience.

Consciously considering cultural hypotheses is a central component of the process, but it is not always easy to separate cultural and psychological factors. This is a special challenge when the focus is on one student at a time.

How to make the cultural inquiry process work

The Cultural Inquiry Process provides a useful framework for exploring ideas about cultural factors that might be contributing to students’ performance in school. Although an individual teacher could apply the process, there are benefits to doing it as a team, whether as an existing teaching team or a team developed specifically for this purpose. A team approach encourages multiple points of view, allows for a coordinated strategy where appropriate, and provides needed support.

The team concept should be extended to include other available resources. Counselors, PTA members, parent liaisons, and mentors from the community should be drawn in where appropriate. Media specialists can assist teams in securing relevant materials. Multicultural education specialists could play the kind of role the anthropologist played on our teams.

Regular meetings are important. Having meetings scheduled in advance allows teams to regularly set aside time to focus on these issues. It is important that the principal support the process by providing time for teams to meet regularly.

One team member needs to facilitate the meetings. When first considering a focus student, it is helpful to go through the steps of the process in order, from beginning to end. Subsequently, team members repeat steps in the process as needed and update other team members. Minutes of each meeting are an important reference tool.

Having cultural information in order to generate cultural hypotheses is an important part of the process. While the anthropologist’s role in our teams included suggesting cultural hypotheses, other team members also had ideas. If team members already have a familiarity with cultural issues, that may be enough to begin. If
not, an introductory inservice may be helpful. All team members should look for relevant information in journals and newspapers, and then share the information with the team. Professional libraries and other local resources can be used to identify needed information. Published resources for ideas about cultural hypotheses and interventions include Abi-Nader (1990), Goldman and McDermott (1987), Gonzalez, Moll, Floyd-Tenerny, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales and Amanti (1993), Jacob (1995), Jacob and Jordan (1993), Ogbo (1992), and Phelan and Davidson (1993).

Conclusions
The Cultural Inquiry Process, which combines classroom inquiry and principles of educational anthropology, has the potential to broaden teachers' understandings of students from diverse cultural backgrounds in order to improve the education of increasingly diverse student bodies. Moreover, the collaborative process, university faculty working in the public schools with teachers on their concerns and challenges, offers a model for future staff development.

References

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