Culture, Curriculum, and Identity in Education
For the many lessons they taught me about culture and identity, this book is dedicated to the memory of my grandmothers, Eunice Milner, Annie Williams, and Corine Williams.
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I have spent my entire professional career grappling with issues related to educating teachers for the growing numbers of culturally diverse students in our nation’s public schools. These culturally diverse students are African American, Latino, and American Indian students who rank at the bottom of most measures of school achievement. Data presented in this book point out that teachers who work in schools attended by students of color are mostly White females whose limited experience and preservice education programs have left them unprepared to teach in urban, high poverty, and diverse schools.

H. Richard Milner IV has compiled an outstanding volume, *Culture, Curriculum, and Identity in Education*, that analyzes equity and diversity in P through 12 schools and teacher education. Within this broad and necessary context, the book raises some critical issues not previously explored in many multicultural and urban education texts. These cutting-edge topics include, for example, gender, spirituality, English-language learners (ELL), bilingual education, immigration, and identity, as well as practical suggestions and implications for program implementation and revision, theory development, and research.

As I read the various chapters in the book, I reflected on the philosophy and writings of my mentor and dear friend, the late Dr. Asa G. Hilliard (Nana Baffour Amankwata II). Dr. Hilliard was clear in his thinking that we could solve the “problems” of low achievement for students of African descent (and other students on the margins of learning and opportunity) by transforming ordinary solutions into extraordinary ones. He wrote, “It is clear that ordinary public school teachers, with unselected regular classrooms, serving poor children, without specialized standardized programs, can move students to the highest academic levels in a short period of time. It is not the children or their parents, poverty, culture or bilingual status (correlates that explain little or nothing) that determine academic success. It is good teaching” (Hilliard, 2000, p. 6).
Hilliard also understood that quality classroom instruction took place within the broader context of school and society. Referencing Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* (1991), he stressed, “Our children’s manifest problems in public education virtually all have to do with opportunity to learn” (Hilliard, 2000), and “our highest research priority ought to be given to the study of what disables ordinarily effective pedagogy, disables systems that crush the spirits of teachers and the students, and blocks their natural genius” (Hilliard, 2007).

Hence, the challenge and the legacy that Hilliard left the P through 12 and teacher-education community were not only related to closing the achievement gap but also related to closing the other gaps that prevent culturally diverse students from experiencing school success. These gaps include the teacher-quality gap, the teacher-training gap, the challenging-curriculum gap, the school-funding gap, the digital-divide gap, the wealth and income gap, the employment-opportunity gap, the affordable-housing gap, the health care gap, the nutrition gap, the school-integration gap, and the quality child-care gap. He urged teacher educators to do the following:

- Define their role as social reconstructivists
- Teach their students how to dismantle systems of racism, inequality, and oppression
- Advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves
- Tackle issues of structural inequality
- Address apathy, ignorance, and racism wherever they exist

These themes and the challenges embedded within them are emphasized in this book. Part I, “Identity and P through 12 Curriculum in Multiple Contexts,” includes chapters by Toshalis (Chapter 1) and Milner (Chapter 2).

Toshalis’s chapter explains how teachers react to the identity-perception gap. He raises the question: How do teachers describe a gap between “who I think I am” and “who students think I am”? The power of Toshalis’s research is that his findings explore one of the most basic elements surrounding teacher-student interactions and their subsequent relationships. He explains that teachers’ perceived identity impacts their ability to teach diverse students and their own sense of worth. Rather than avoiding the vulnerability and stress caused by this gap, Toshalis challenges us to take the necessary steps to view the gap as a resource for further engagement, exploration, and understanding.

Milner’s chapter further explores the importance of teacher-student identity and interaction through his research on an African American teacher and the complexities of developing a multicultural curriculum in
a predominantly White teaching context. The chapter provides important perspectives on how the teacher negotiates and balances her own beliefs and ideology in the curriculum in order to meet the needs of her mostly White, suburban students. Indeed, Milner’s chapter challenges readers to consider the important interplay between teacher and student identity and what students have the opportunity to learn in school.

Part II, “Culture, Curriculum, and Identity with Implications for English-Language Learners and Immigration,” contains three chapters. In Chapter 3, Iddlings and Rose report on an inexperienced elementary teacher in a research-based, professional-development project who attempts to work with a recent immigrant Mexican student enrolled in her class. The researchers conclude that some of the essential supports needed for the student’s success include the unrestricted use of native language, a rigorous curriculum, a clear and explicit organization of the content, and opportunities for peer interaction. They point out that the challenges of implementing these supports are formidable given the current political climate focused on accountability and high-stakes testing.

In Chapter 4, Irizarry and Raible unpack the sociopolitical context of English-language learners (ELLs). Using the voices of students, their families, and elders, they shed light on the commitments and responsibilities that multicultural teacher educators must embrace in order to provide a meaningful education for ELLs. They push readers to face the more uncomfortable stances we take on issues related to ELLs and call for a teacher-education agenda based on “political clarity” about the sociopolitical context teachers and students encounter. This agenda would challenge marginalization and encourage teacher educators to be border crossers who develop strong ties with linguistically diverse students and their families. James, in Chapter 5, explores the experiences of two African Canadian college students and unveils contemporary issues seldom discussed in the literature. These issues include how culturally diverse immigrant students sometimes distance themselves from their community peers in order to succeed, and how they navigate and circumvent racism. James allows the participants in his study to reflect back on their schooling experiences in an urban context in order to gauge their struggles and success in college. Implications for immigration, identity, and culture are embedded throughout each of the chapters in this section.

The third part of the book, Spirituality as Identity with Implications for Research and Teaching, has two separate chapter authors: Dantley and Hancock. The chapter authors boldly consider an often-omitted feature of identity in the research literature—spirituality. For instance, in Chapter 6, Dantley calls into question the hegemony perpetuated by traditional qualitative research where issues of spirituality are concerned. Using the
published works of Dillard, Tillman, Lather, and Milner, he constructs new ways to think about qualitative research that is positioned in an activist political agenda. Furthermore, he argues that spirituality is so entrenched in subjectivity and one’s internal focus that traditional methods seem “self-defeating and pointless.”

While Dantley focuses on spirituality in research, Hancock’s focus in Chapter 7 is spirituality and teaching. He summons the reader to consider our educational system as morally bankrupt. He states that there are fundamental issues that teaching and learning should embrace—humanity, wholeness, and intellectual peace. Hancock brings to the fore these commonplace and accepted values present in noneducation settings but curiously absent in education. He proposes that the education community reflect on moral principles like respect, love, peace, and care. Indeed, he believes that critical reflection is a spiritual process that helps teachers support students’ personal and academic success. Additionally, critical reflection assists teachers in adopting social activism as part of their professional responsibility.

The final part of the book is titled *Culture, Curriculum, and Identity with Implications for Teacher Education*. This final part has chapters by Milner (Chapter 8) and Cross (Chapter 9). Milner considers race as an identity marker in teacher education and walks readers through a process of inquiry where he attempts to study his own practice, particularly his curriculum development and implementation, in order to improve it. The chapter challenges teacher educators to consider their own identity in their work, to address the salience and presence of race as identity in teacher education, and to reenvision the work of the curriculum in their courses and in the teacher education program. In the final chapter of the book, Chapter 9, Cross explores the meanings of the racial, ethnic, and cultural mismatch between the mostly White teaching force and the growing, diverse P through 12 student body. Using the often-ignored voices of African American, Latina, and Native American teachers, she discovers that the teachers are in agreement that extraordinary efforts are required to reframe teacher education from its current focus on human relations to promote diversity to a bolder and more reformative agenda that prepares teachers with the efficacy and agency necessary for systemic and structural change.

The astute analyses and compelling recommendations proposed in this book would resonate with Asa Hilliard. The authors do not focus on simplistic strategies and programs. Instead, they present bold proposals rooted in social justice and excellence that require commitment and courage by individuals. Hilliard reminds us that excellence comes from people and not programs and advises us to forget about decoys, robot-like approaches, and “one-trick ponies” like high-stakes testing, vouchers, charters, commercial
programs, remedial work, and individual educational programs (Hilliard, 2003, 2007).

Finally, the book underscores the courageous vision necessary for excellence and equity, a vision eloquently described by Hilliard (2003): “If we love the children, then we must do whatever it takes to provide them with the teachers and school leaders they deserve. We cannot tolerate or support ideologies and practices that cripple our children further—those that hold our children as the problem or those that assume that our teachers and school leaders are not capable of becoming powerful factors in the lives of students. We need a valid vision. We need the will. With vision and will, everything is possible” (p. 165).

Asa Hilliard’s philosophy and vision are expressed throughout the chapters in this volume, and readers are presented with clear and explicit plans of action for social justice and equity for all children. Indeed, *Culture, Curriculum, and Identity in Education* provides readers with research-based approaches that are grounded in theory and that can make a real difference in the lives of teachers, teacher educators, and students.

**References**


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Introduction

Culture, Curriculum, and Identity in Education

H. Richard Milner IV, Vanderbilt University

Culture

This book is about the intersections of culture, curriculum, and identity in education. Individuals and groups of people operate in and through cultural frames of reference and in and through social contexts. Our beliefs, ideologies, ways of knowing, preferences, and practices are shaped and guided by culture. For reasons elaborated elsewhere (see Chapter 8 for instance) but beyond the scope of this introduction, White teachers sometimes do not believe and fully understand that they have a culture (see, for instance, Milner & Smithey, 2003), or that their worldview and practices are culturally grounded, guided, and facilitated. They struggle to understand that they, like people of color, too are cultural beings and that their conceptions, decisions, and actions are culturally shaped and mediated. They sometimes classify others as “cultural beings” or “diverse” and sometimes do not recognize the salience and centrality of their own culture, and how it is woven through their work as teachers. Culture is steeply embedded within and around each of us, is in and among all groups of people, and is especially shaped by the social context of education.

Culture is not a static concept—“a category for conveniently sorting people according to expected values, beliefs, and behaviors” (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, p. 3). Rather, culture is ever changing and ever evolving, and, fundamentally, the contributors of this book attempt to convey the message that the work of teachers, teacher educators, researchers, students, parents, and principals is deeply guided by culture and contexts. We are cultural beings and workers. Accordingly, we must engage our work