

**Crossing Over:  
Narratives of Successful Border Crossings  
of African American Teachers during Desegregation**

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Paper presented at American Educational Research Association Annual Conference

Denver, Colorado

April, 2010

Abstract

This study examines the narratives of three African American teachers who participated in an early desegregation plan that transferred selected African American teachers into all-White schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While many of these teachers experienced rejection in their new schools, the three African American teachers in this study successfully transitioned across cultural borders. Their narratives indicate that the ability to form interpersonal relationships was a factor in their success, allowing them to garner the support of a dominant group member. While collegial and parental acceptance could be predicated on the support of a single powerful member of the dominant group, student acceptance was built on individual trust and cumulative demonstrations of care established at the classroom level. These findings have implications for contemporary urban schooling, in which young White teachers often experience difficulties in adapting to teaching in all-minority schools.

Crossing Over:

Narratives of Successful Cross-Cultural Teaching during Desegregation

Historically in the southern United States, the border between Black and White cultures was distinct, rigid, and encoded into law. For example, Blacks and Whites did not eat in the same restaurants, reside in the same hotels, use the same public restrooms, or drink from the same water fountains. The rigidity of the formalized borders of “Jim Crow” kept African Americans in their place, and also kept Whites in their place. Stepping across the border between cultures would likely result in disapproval for an individual member of either racial group. However, in certain circumstances, Whites in power positions had the ability to adjust the boundaries “to either expand or shrink the distance and connectedness among individuals, groups, and places (Giroux, 2005).” After the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*, schools became contested spaces of the borders between Black and White cultures and also the site of successful border crossings.

One of the results of the 2008 election of Barack Obama is the heralding of *Brown v. Board of Education* as the pivotal change engine in improving the education of African American students. However, African American teachers carried much of the burden of the *Brown* decision in terms of personal sacrifice (Bell, 1983; Cecelski, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2004) as southern school districts experimented with court-mandated desegregation plans. One such desegregation plan required transferring African-American teachers to all-White schools in an experiment called “cross-over teaching” (Davis, 1999; Wilson & Segall, 2001). This plan satisfied the letter, if not the full intent, of *Brown v. Board of Education* and appeared far less radical than full-scale integration of the student body. The plan required chosen African

## Crossing Over

American teachers to leave the known and secured cultural spaces of the all-Black school to enter the contested, and often closed, cultural spaces of the all-White school. The literature on this experiment in desegregation are filled with stories of African American teachers being rejected and ignored by White colleagues, demeaned and insulted by White administrators, distrusted and challenged by White parents, and disrespected and defied by White students (Davis, 1999; Wilson & Segall, 2001). However, some African American teachers adapted and thrived in their new environments, successfully crossing cultural borders. What can these successful border crossers teach us? Can we use their lessons to improve teaching across cultural borders in today's schools? This study examines the narratives of three pioneer border crossers who successfully adapted to teaching in all-White schools and examines the factors led to success.

### Theories of Border Crossing

Two theories of cultural border crossing frame this study. The first is Chang's (1999) theory that borders are more fluid on the individual level than on the group level. Chang defines a cultural border as "a barrier that a more powerful side constructs to guard its own political power, cultural knowledge, and privileges (p.2)". White teachers may have rejected an African American teacher as a colleague while part of the group, however, a single member of the group might willingly reach out to an African American teacher on an individual and interpersonal level by providing guidance and support. The acceptance of one powerful group member may have weakened the resistance of the group enough to mitigate overtly hostile acts towards the African American teacher and open the door for acceptance.

The second theory is Marbokela & Madsen's (2003) adaptation of the embedded intergroup theory to African American teachers in suburban schools, which posits that when an

## Crossing Over

outsider enters into the midst of a dominant group, the newcomer is perceived as a threat to the group commonality and the group responds by heightening the cultural boundaries to reject the outsider. However, when the newcomer's personality and behaviors closely mimic the group, the response is less intense allowing the space for acceptance of the outsider. As such, the more "white acting" the African American teacher is, the more likely she is to be accepted.

### Purpose of the Study

The phenomenon of crossover teaching emerged while interviewing retired African American teachers for a larger historical study focused on reading instruction in segregated schools (Tompkins, 2005). In the course of questioning participants about their instructional practices, comparisons in the availability of instructional materials and condition of facilities between Black and White schools surfaced in the narratives of teachers who had taught in both settings. The stories of these cross-over teachers were compelling in highlighting the inequity of "separate but equal" schooling. Further, I had experienced the cross-over teaching plan from the student's perspective during high school in Atlanta. The experiment in Atlanta lasted only one year, with most White teachers quickly returning to their previous segregated environments; however some African American teachers remained in their new White schools. The teachers that chose to remain in the all-White schools were pioneers in cultural border crossing, yet with few exceptions (Foster, 1990; Noblit, 1993; Wilson & Segall, 2001), their experiences have not been examined to inform contemporary cross-cultural teaching. This study aims to fill a void in the literature on desegregation by examining how three teachers adapted to teaching a population that was not only racially and culturally different but, in some instances, initially hostile.

### Crossing Borders in Early Desegregation

Crossover teaching was a school desegregation plan implemented in some southern states in the 1960s and early 1970s. Often, it was a blatant delaying tactic to avoid full desegregation, while in other cases it was a genuine attempt to gradually move towards integration without the violent upheaval that might result from immediate desegregation of the student population.

Regardless of the intent, it was more integration than many Southern Whites were prepared to accept at the time and it met with resistance from many teachers, parents, and students in all-White schools. White parents, for example, were uncertain whether an African American teacher was qualified to teach their children (Wilson & Segall, 2001). The general belief in the inferiority of Black educators was bolstered by the Coleman Report (Wong, 2004), which concluded that the longer African American students remained in African American schools the further they fell behind their White counterparts. The interpretation of the study in some quarters was that a deficiency in the skills of Black teachers was to blame rather than the general deprivation suffered by segregated Black schools. While the Coleman report provided ammunition to the proponents of school desegregation on one hand, it also added credence to the belief that African American teachers were less effective than their White counterparts. This concern led districts to be very selective in choosing which African American teachers to place in White schools.

Initially, Black teachers were chosen for integrated settings because they fit a particular stereotype of “their kind of Negro” (Madsen & Hollins, 2000). Though the term is not directly defined, it can be surmised that such an individual would possess the qualities that would allow them to easily meld into White institutions. These may have been individuals whose grammar and speech patterns, skin color, dress, and general demeanor closely matched that of the White

## Crossing Over

culture. In other cases, it may have been that these teachers held advanced degrees and/or had more successful teaching experience than their peers. Indeed, the teachers selected were considered to be the best and the brightest by African American standards in the belief that they would not embarrass the race (Robinson, 1978, Wilson & Segall, 2001).

## School Climate and the Faculty

One well-documented crossover teaching plan took place in Austin, Texas and is detailed in a study by Wilson & Segall (2001). From 1964 to 1971, several Black and White teachers participated in the plan. Narratives of participating teachers indicate that while some teachers had negative experiences, successful border crossers described a desire to blend in and be seen as an example for good teaching. One of the teachers described it this way, "...I was trying to ...become homogenized and to work with my co-workers so they would not see me as an impediment (Wilson & Segall, 2001, p. 58)". Yet the study also reveals two different school environments in Austin's crossover plan, one primarily Mexican-American school was inclined to accept desegregation while the other school whose population was predominantly White appeared to have made life as difficult as possible for their first cross-over teachers. The narratives of the teachers from the two schools differ dramatically in describing their first year in their new schools and provide some evidence that the overall school climate can play a role in fostering either a heightened and rigid cultural boundary or a more flexible cultural boundary. The more flexible the cultural boundary, the more accepting the school would be of cultural differences. This may indicate that the elements of a successful border crossing are not completely dependent on individual characteristics of the teacher and that schools have the ability to position themselves to support the acceptance of cross-cultural teachers.

## Crossing Over

In terms of interpersonal faculty relationships, the Wilson & Segall (2001) study contradicts Chang's (1999) theory that individual cultural borders may be less rigid than group borders. While teachers that crossed over to the predominantly Mexican American school were able to solicit support from White teachers in the school, the teacher in the predominantly White school appears to have been met with a unified resistance that prevented even acceptance on the individual level between teachers. The teachers in the all-White school joined together to attempt to oust the African American teacher by accusing her of having low teaching standards, and in one instance, accused the teacher of coming to school drunk in an attempt to discredit her. This particular African American teacher found equal resistance from students in the classroom. Granted, the study relies completely on the narrative of the participating teacher but her accounts seem to indicate that she met with total rejection in the first year of her transfer.

Davis (1999) provides another account of crossover teaching in the state of Louisiana, where the experiences seem particularly negative. White administrators harassed African American teachers because their speech or writing ability did not conform to White standards, refused to place them in classrooms, and openly denigrated them in front of White colleagues. Other accounts report that administrators maintained heightened cultural boundaries by encouraging White teachers to report on the behavior of their African American colleagues (Madsen & Hollis, 2000).

In some instances in cross-over teaching, students openly challenged teachers' knowledge of the subject matter or made disrespectful and hurtful comments without fear of punishment (Davis, 1999; Wilson & Segall, 2001). African American teachers sometimes found that it was difficult to retain a positive sense of self. One teacher in the Wilson & Segall study coined the term "unselfing" to indicate her loss of professional status in the school. Yet the



## Crossing Over

students population appeared quicker to move towards acceptance of the teacher when that teacher choose to maintain calmness in the face of hostile acts.

### Successful Border Crossings

Despite the negative stories, similarities in the experiences of successful border crossers emerge from the literature. The literature indicates a consistent and explicit awareness on the part of each successful border crosser that they would have to adapt to a new cultural territory and most of them prepared ahead of time by adjusting speech patterns, curriculum plans, and teaching pedagogies to those of the new culture. Some of the teachers stated that they sought to improve their content knowledge in order to be prepared for questions and challenges from students. In other cases, successful border crossers took steps to engage in available leadership opportunities, experiment with new curriculum, pioneer new teaching approaches, serve as supervising teachers for White university student teachers, sponsor social clubs, and join national professional organizations (Wilson & Segall, 2001). Successful border crossers believed that they were selected for a purpose, took pride in being chosen, and were determined to be the best possible teacher they could be. Essentially, they attempted to become ‘super-teachers,’ consciously going a step beyond their White counterparts.

Many successful border crossers continued to act on their previous beliefs in demonstrating interpersonal care for students in their new schools. Some decided ahead of time to be supportive of their students, regardless of their personal reception in the classroom. Student support took various forms, such as attending students’ sporting and extra-curricular events, learning a new language to better communicate with the students and their parents, emphasizing positive aspects of the students’ cultures as well as the teacher’s culture, being available for consultation before and after school, and adapting lessons to address the needs underachievers.

### Methodology

The data used in this study was collected as part of a larger qualitative study on teaching reading in southern segregated schools. The original participants were the result of snowball sampling; however three teachers volunteered their experiences in crossover teaching in detail. I conducted three one-hour interviews with the each teacher individually (Seidman, 1998) using a semi-structured format for the questioning. When possible, I confirmed their information through the use of archival documents, such as school records, newspaper articles, and school district teacher demographic records. While these documents could not confirm specific details of personal narratives, they did provide support of events and timelines. Further, in using snowball sampling many of the teachers knew each other and their own narratives often provided further confirmation of the experiences that surrounded crossover teaching in their districts. Taped interviews were transcribed and copies of the transcripts were provided to all participants for review and corrections. All participants allowed the use of their real names. I have also used the real names of the school districts and schools when they were provided. Data analysis for this study consisted of coding teacher's statements regarding their crossover experiences into broad themes using Nvivo software for organization of documents and retrieval.

### The Stories of Three Pioneer Border Crossers

I interviewed three successful border crossers. Two of the teachers came from a major metropolitan city with a large minority population and the third from a smaller suburban district adjacent to the city. To the credit of both school systems, when desegregation finally occurred in 1970, it was with little disruption of general schooling. Both districts escaped the busing controversy that plagued many southern districts and school officials complied with federal judgments to desegregate without the high losses in African American teachers.

## Crossing Over

### *Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Petty (Atlanta Public Schools)*

In 1970, 70% of the students in the Atlanta Public School system were African American (Grant, 1993), the majority of which were attending segregated schools. There had been previous attempts at limited desegregation by inviting “good” Black students to transfer into White schools. These students were volunteers, sanctioned by the school system, and parents provided transportation to and from school. However in 1970, a federal judge ordered the school system to transfer 800 African American teachers to predominantly White schools and 800 White teachers to predominantly Black schools to achieve a racially balanced public school faculty. Many White teachers resigned rather than submit to the plan; only to be given their jobs back the next year when the plan was discontinued. The plan was equally unpopular among African American teachers, and The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) openly opposed it, however most African American teachers submitted rather than lose their jobs. Among the teachers who participated in this phase of desegregation were Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Petty.

#### Mrs. Thomas

Mrs. Thomas made her change to an all-White school in 1969, a bit ahead of the plan. She remembers that her transfer occurred in the middle of the year, around March or April. So, while the school district offered summer workshops to prepare African American teachers for teaching in their new White schools, Mrs. Thomas did not attend since her change of schools had already occurred. Mrs. Thomas was a veteran teacher having taught more than fifteen years in two different all-Black schools and she had obtained her Master’s degree from Atlanta University in 1968.

Mrs. Thomas described her first day in her new elementary school this way:

## Crossing Over

Well, when I went there (and this is an experience I shall never forget)...When I went there; I had a young White principal. This man was twenty-nine years old. He had come from a high school as a coach. But when we went into that school that morning, and I think there were three of us who went that particular time...He got up and he welcomed each of us. At that particular time, most people who did go over said they did not get that kind of reception. He was unusually nice to us, very much so (D. Thomas Interview, January 22, 2005).

From the beginning of her experience, she and her colleagues received the personal acceptance and implied protection of the school principal, an experience that Mrs. Thomas acknowledges was unusual for the time. She credits this principal's support as the main reason the transfer went well. While this acceptance at the administrative level may have set the tone for the teachers and staff at the school, she found that she alone had to set the tone for the students. She recounted an early incident with two students:

I remember that these two girls came to my room and told me, "Excuse me, please, here is a book that the principal sent." I opened it, looked at it and closed it back and put it on the desk because I was, you know, teaching. The girls stood there and looked at me. The name of the book was, *How Ten Little Niggers Came From India*. They were looking at me to see what my reaction was going to be. I said, "All right, Thank you", and put it down (D. Thomas Interview, January 22, 2005).

It is unclear what the actual title of the book was, however it may have been Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Niggers*, later changed to *Ten Little Indians* or another book titled, *Ten Little Niggers and How They Came to India* (author unknown). The student's intent was likely to shock and

## Crossing Over

embarrass the teacher and her lack of anger must have puzzled them. Later she approached the librarian, who apologized and explained that she, along with two community volunteers had done their best to clear out some of the offensive books that had populated the school library but somehow had missed this one. This was the only overt racial incident that Mrs. Thomas could recall from students but she also revealed that was not the case with all of the transferred teachers. One of the other African American teachers had been so tormented by the students in her classroom that she cried every day. It is unclear from the interview if that teacher sought help from the administration or from other teachers, but Mrs. Thomas reported that she left a few months later at the end of the school year.

Mrs. Thomas explained her decision to remain in the school this way:

I never really went back to an all-black school the rest of my time [teaching].

Many teachers did. But I stayed because I had some decent principals. You know they treated me nice and they were White... It really was an experience. But had it not been for this principal, I don't think we really would have made it either.

When her school closed years later, she transferred to another school that was predominantly White.

Mrs. Petty

Mrs. Petty had vividly detailed recall of her cross-over teaching experience, remembering dates, names, and places throughout the interview. She had obtained a specialist degree from Atlanta University just prior to her transfer and had many years of experience in two well-respected African American schools when she was transferred to her new school, located in an affluent area of Atlanta. Her transfer occurred in 1970 as part of the massive district initiative mandated by the courts. The school was predominantly Jewish at that time and Mrs. Petty

## Crossing Over

explained that a rabbi would regularly visit the classroom weekly, admonishing the students to do their best and obey their teacher. Ironically, she was Catholic but enjoyed the rabbi's support, acknowledging that he held more influence with the students than the principal of the school. Her experience with an influential religious figure working closely with the school echoed that of one of the teachers in the Wilson and Segall study (2001), in which a Roman Catholic priest also worked closely with the school administration in a predominantly Mexican-American school. She recalled having no difficulties with the other teachers in the school and found her White female principal to be supportive. She taught sixth grade math and English classes while her counterpart, another African American teacher, taught sixth grade social studies and reading. The school had already desegregated the student body with three or four Black students that were enrolled, though it is not clear if they were in her classroom or how long they had attended the school.

Mrs. Petty held very strong views on teaching and bristled at the thought that the income level of her students dictated learning ability or influenced her expectations of students. She felt that she gave her new White affluent students the same care that she had given to her less affluent students in the previous all-Black schools in which she had taught. However, she had to admit that all but one of her White students read above their expected grade level. This forced her to use the library in her African American neighborhood to check out large numbers of books to provide additional reading for the students.

Her students seemed curious about her life and how she differed from them. She said they would sometimes ask her how she knew so much about math, her reply was "I went to school." But like many of the successful cross-over teachers in the literature, she was constantly working to increase her content knowledge to make sure she gave her students the best possible

## Crossing Over

education. For example, in math she found that she her own knowledge was limited using only the base-10 number system, so when she noticed that her teacher's edition suggested teaching students other number based systems, she took it upon herself to study until she had mastered teaching the concept and then presented it to her students. She explained,

I taught those 6<sup>th</sup> grade students at Morningside other [number] bases. I never studied other bases in my life but I took that teacher's edition and I learned other bases. Then I was ready to teach them but I taught myself [first]. It was not in my math books when I came along, but my students didn't know I was just learning. (Petty Interview 2, December 22, 2004)"

She remained at Morningside for three years until the sixth grade was eliminated from all Atlanta elementary schools and replaced with the middle school model. She chose not to teach in the middle school setting.

Mrs. Petty spoke well of her colleagues at the desegregated school, as well as the children and their parents. However, in many ways her situation differed from the other two border crossers in this study because the school climate supported desegregation and discouraged a heightened cultural border. The school predominantly served another ethnic minority, one that had been very supportive of the civil rights movement, and a respected religious leader regularly visited the classroom to assist with any discipline problems. Finally, her tenure at the school ended when the structure of the elementary schools in the district changed by moving the 6<sup>th</sup> grade to middle school and Mrs. Petty returned to one of the African American schools where she had previously taught, unlike the other two participants, who continued to teach in predominantly White schools for the remainder of their careers. Yet, her narrative provides

## Crossing Over

support for the evidence in the literature that successful border crossing can be influenced by the school environment as well as by individual characteristics.

### *Mrs. Handspike (Clayton County, GA)*

In a suburban district, adjacent to Atlanta, experimental desegregation began in 1965 and led one teacher to spend two years as the only Black teacher in an all-White school. Mrs. Handspike, had taught five years in all-Black schools. In 1966, she was “volunteered” by her principal to participate in a program carried out in conjunction with a large state university, with the purpose of preparing African American teachers to teach in White schools. While the archival documents did not mention this program, Mrs. Handspike believed that it was designed to improve the teaching skills of Black teachers in anticipation of their having to teach White students. It is important to note that, according to Mrs. Handspike, she was not aware of a similar program offered to prepare White teachers to teach Black students.

In November, 1966, Mrs. Handspike transferred to a recently-opened all-White school in the county. She agreed to the transfer, feeling that she had little choice. Mrs. Handspike’s introduction to the staff was not addressed in the interview but immediately she was struck with the difference in availability of instructional materials between the all-Black school and the all-White school was apparent. Mrs. Handspike had worked without a teacher’s edition or workbooks and other accompaniments to the basal text at the all-Black school and in fact, did not know that such materials even existed until she transferred. Further, she had never been asked for her opinion on which texts should be adopted for her classes and was surprised to find that the teachers in the white school had input into the process of textbook selection. She also had not been the recipient of any professional development regarding classroom instruction until she joined the all-White faculty. While these differences were striking, Mrs. Handspike did not



## Crossing Over

appear to associate any injustice to the disparities; rather she felt that her professional standing was enhanced by the advantages of the new school. When queried about the social awkwardness of being the only Black teacher on an all-White staff, Mrs. Handspike said that she had not detected any hostility from the other teachers but admitted that she generally kept to herself and did not spend time in the teacher's lounge and at lunch she ate with the students rather than her colleagues.

However in her first year in the school was not actually given a classroom since she arrived after the classes had been established. Instead, groups of third grade students from each of the three White classrooms were brought to her for reading and math. She did not teach the lowest students, she explained, only the average children were brought to her "small room" to work on reading and math. In this situation, one White teacher, Mrs. Porter, reached out to her. Based on her accounts, Mrs. Porter oriented her to the rules and routines of the school and aided her in setting up her instructional day. Several times she said, "I remember Mrs. Porter being very, very helpful to me (Handspike Interview, January 15, 2005)." The following fall, Mrs. Handspike was given her own third grade classroom. Mrs. Handspike believed that not having a classroom that first year may have been a factor in her easy transition, stating, "...I didn't have a classroom and was just working with groups of children all day that might have made it, you know, a little bit easier for me (Handspike Interview)." When asked if she had felt any resistant from other teachers, she referred back to the protective power of Mrs. Porter., "I mean, you could tell that there was some that probably wanted to be standoffish and never wanted to talk, but on my grade level, just like I said, Mrs. Porter, she was really nice to me, you know. So what the others were thinking, it really didn't matter to me." It is interesting that Mrs. Porter's support alone was enough to quash any overt acts of rejection.

## Crossing Over

While she was not aware of it at the time, Mrs. Handspike also had the support of the assistant principal (who would become her principal at a later date). When asked if she had any problems with White parents when she was given her own classroom, she mentioned a story told to her only at her retirement:

I think the principal at that time, he did a really good job of not letting me know that he was getting complaints, you know, about a black teacher being able to teach their children. I can only remember the principal when I retired, he liked to tell this story. He was assistant principal at one time. But he liked to tell this story because he says that they didn't bother me and I didn't know this. But, he came to me one day and he asked me did I mind having a visitor. So I said, "No." So this lady, she came in. I was teaching math. She came in and she sat. She stayed about ten or fifteen minutes and after that she left. Well, I didn't think anything about that, but he liked to tell this story. He says that she was one of the parents that was saying that no black teacher could teach her child. She came in and he said she only stayed ten or fifteen minutes because when she saw what I was doing and how I was doing it, she left out of a side door and he never heard any more complaints from her.

(Handspike Interview, January 15, 2005)."

Like Mrs. Thomas, Mrs. Handspike continued to teach at predominantly White schools until her retirement in 2003.

## Findings and Discussion

Perhaps the most striking feature of all three interviewees was the absolute pride they expressed regarding their desegregation experiences. Their narratives focused on how they

## Crossing Over

enjoyed teaching students, putting little emphasis on their personal feelings of fear and rejection. However, it may be that the passage of time has blunted the emotional memories of their experiences.

In all three cases, the teachers saw themselves as professionals hired to teach; regardless of surroundings. For example, Mrs. Handspike did not take offense at the lack of a classroom her first year, yet this was a known tactic that some White schools used to demean Black teachers and drive them away. It had, in fact, the opposite effect on Mrs. Handspike. She believed that she benefited from the situation. She felt that in removing and instructing small groups of children from each of the other third grade teachers' classrooms, she was viewed as aid to the teachers rather than as a threat. By maintaining contact with each teacher in a non-threatening manner, she felt that she gained their acceptance while proving her competence in teaching their students. Mrs. Handspike, however, took little credit for her success in the situation and constantly mentioned the help of one White colleague, Mrs. Porter, in adjusting to her new school. Mrs. Porter's helpfulness indicates that she served as Mrs. Handspike's guide and mentor in the new school setting, reaching across the cultural border existed and sharing her knowledge with Mrs. Handspike. As such, Mrs. Handspike managed to ease into the school without perceiving any acts of rejection.

Yet, what may also be equally a factor in successfully crossing the cultural border is Mrs. Handspike's personality. She presented herself as calm and quiet. She admitted that she did not seek out the company of the other teachers. She avoided the teacher's lounge and, not having a class of her own, she also managed to avoid the school lunchroom. Her own explanation of her actions in that first year of transfer is that she kept to herself and carried out her job with purpose

## Crossing Over

and competence, stating, “Whether they socialized with me or not, you know, it didn’t matter to me...it was not my primary purpose for being there.”

Mrs. Thomas also seemed to project a calm demeanor. For example, when the two students brought the offensive book to her, she smiled and said “Thank you” and continued to teach her class. Rather than reacting in anger and reporting the students to the principal, she downplayed the incident and then sought out more information from the librarian later in the day. She, too, indicated that her primary purpose in the school was to teach. Additional insight comes from her report of the one teacher who cried daily over student torments and who left the school. Mrs. Thomas expressed sympathy but described the tormented teacher as ‘tender-hearted’, a term denoting excessive sensitivity. So while docile on the outside, these teachers appeared to understand that inner fortitude was necessary to be successful.

Contrary to the other two teachers, the third teacher, Mrs. Petty, was self-assured, outspoken, a leader in her previous schools, with a history of being politically aware as a union representative in the schools. She was well-traveled and more sophisticated than the other interviewees. Of course, it should not be assumed that these are the same characteristics she possessed as a cross-over teacher but her narrative indicated that she did not fit the profile of “the good Negro.” Neither docile, nor reticent, her strength appeared to be her expertise in teaching. As stated earlier, her new school had a small exclusive student body, and was located in an affluent neighborhood. Her presence was supported by the principal and the rabbi and she and the other African American teacher were the only 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers in the school. However, her narrative indicated that she was pro-active in making sure that she lived up to her reputation as a great teacher, like many of the successful border crossers in the other studies, she strived to be a “super-teacher.”

## Crossing Over

### Lessons for today's border crossers

A sampling of three teachers is not sufficient for examining all aspects of successful cultural border crossing but can draw attention to ideas that may be pertinent to today's public school environment where cultural differences between white teachers and minority students may be a factor in student achievement (Kunjufu, 2002). This cultural dissonance was postulated by Irvine (1990) as a factor in Black student failure. Yet it is a factor consistently ignored by school reform theorists and politicians. Ironically, teacher education programs mandate diversity classes that consist primarily of readings that reinforce a deficit stance towards minorities or suggest that colorblindness is required. These classes may actually reinforce ideas of cultural dissonance, often portraying students from minority cultures as requiring special skills or behavior management techniques to teach (King, 1990).

Recent statistics indicate that approximately 41% of students in America are categorized as minority (National Center for Education, 2007), yet the majority of their teachers or about 81% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004) are White. Most of these teachers have attended predominantly White high schools and colleges, with their first extended contact with minority students occurring with their first teaching job. These White teachers, and even administrators, entering majority Black or Hispanic schools are often so convinced of the "normalcy" and rightness of their own culture that it does not occur to them that they are crossing into a different cultural territory. Rather than searching for ways to breach the cultural border between themselves and their students, they enter the environment imposing their own "right" cultural values, attitudes, and norms upon the students thereby signifying to their students a lack of awareness, or to use vernacular "a lack of respect" of the students' culture. This is not to say that being a minority teacher is enough to mediate cultural dissonance since many minority teachers are trained in the

## Crossing Over

same predominantly White teacher preparation programs that often characterize minority students as deprived, deviant, or dumb.

Minority students often view these teachers as outsiders and a threat to their cultural commonality; as such they react by heightening cultural borders. Minority students reinforce these cultural borders through language that does not reflect “White” norms, clothing that signals an oppositional stance and they engage in behaviors and attitudes that reject the offerings of the educational institutions. What ensues is a cycle of failure fueled by the perception of cultural “disrespect” on both the teacher’s and the student’s part. This cycle of failure is fed by the entrenched beliefs of White teachers and administrators in their own cultural “normalcy”, and the failure to see themselves as interlopers in another culture. Given that attitude, things can never improve.

Could this cycle of cultural misunderstanding be informed by the experiences of successful border crossers? One element that emerged from analysis of the literature in conjunction with the present study is that schools can be instrumental in creating fluid cultural borders. Schools that accepted and prepared for desegregation eased the merger between the two cultures by signaling acceptance from the school leadership. The teachers in these schools seem to take their behavioral cues from someone in power, whether principal, community leader, or respected colleague. In addition to the literature, the acceptance from one member of the dominant group in all three narratives appeared to foster a more positive acceptance of the outsider. Would a mechanism for the enculturation into the cultural community of the students be useful in contemporary schools? High minority/high poverty schools may do well to engage in a dialogue that explicitly addresses the cultural differences between teachers and students. Taking a page from many higher education faculty orientations, schools may want to examine

## Crossing Over

student demographics, have new teachers tour the surrounding areas, ride the bus routes the students take to school, and delve into the problems facing the community at large.

Contemporary schools may also do well to create a meaningful mentoring structure that pairs successful veteran teachers with new hires, thus fostering continuity of knowledge of the students and the community.

Another element that emerges from the narratives, as well as the literature, is the willingness of successful border crossers to create classrooms that demonstrate interpersonal care. The experiences of the three teachers seem to indicate that acceptance from the student population is not predicated on the acceptance of a dominant adult figure; rather students appeared to have independent, and perhaps internal, indicators of acceptance and rejection of a cultural outsider. The dearth of information on how young students negotiated cultural borders is a handicap in formulating how we can assure acceptance but teacher narratives appear to indicate that acts of interpersonal care, such as learning some of the cultural language that students use, initiating parent contact to praise students, or attending sporting events and extracurricular activities of students aided their acceptance among students.

In recalling Ladson-Billing's (1994) groundbreaking work *The Dreamkeepers*, which portrays several teachers who are adept at reaching and teaching African American students, we find that the impact of interpersonal care on connecting to students is supported. Teachers took the initiative to reach across cultural boundaries, first by acknowledging that the existence of a boundary, and second, by looking for ways in which to connect across those boundaries.

What is not clear is how the teacher's personality influences successful cultural border crossing. While the goal of the administration in desegregation may have been to transfer only those "good Negro" teachers, one would not dare attempt to define what kind of teacher works

## Crossing Over

best for African American and other minority populations. In fact, the concept is more offensive now than it was then. The one commonality that may have existed among the three teachers is dedication and resolve and that is an element that all teachers must possess regardless of whom or where they teach.

In conclusion, given the current alienation of minority students from many urban schools and the likelihood that the teachers in these schools will continue to be culturally different from their students, education policy makers must be willing to acknowledge that cultural dissonance may be a factor in student failure. Further the massive turnover of teachers in high minority/high poverty schools must also be addressed. Despite protestations that racism is not a factor, a recent study found that as the number of African American students increase in a school, high quality teachers leave the school (Jackson, 2009). One of the anonymous comments made in response to this article was that African American students are difficult to teach and that difficulty was the fault of Black culture. This kind of cultural misunderstanding cannot be allowed to pass unchallenged and schools must heed the call that it owes all students the best education possible and that means fostering the development of successful border crossers in the classroom.

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