

# Classroom Study

## Part I

Prepared by

### Background Information

I am currently fulfilling my field placement requirement at Abbott Middle School, which is located in the city of Keego Harbor, in the district of West Bloomfield, in the county of Oakland. There are a total of 779 students enrolled at Abbott. The school's student population consists of 73.6% White; 16.2% Black; 6.3% Asian; 3.2% Hispanic; and .7% Native American.<sup>1</sup>

The cooperating teacher (CT) to whom I have been assigned is a thirty-five-year-veteran of teaching. He is one of two eighth-grade social studies teachers at Abbott and is currently responsible for teaching five U.S. History classes to 130 eighth-graders. In order to limit the scope of this study, I will be focusing exclusively on the third-hour class in which there are twenty-three students enrolled. This class is comprised of twelve females and eleven males. The ethnographic composition of the class is one Muslim female and one Muslim male, one Taiwanese female, and two African-American females. The remaining eighteen students are White.

From the information obtained from the CT during our interview, the socioeconomic make-up of the class is approximately 20% upper-middle class, 60% middle class, and 20% lower class. The CT commented that a few of his students in the third-hour are indigent and he is acutely aware of this. At the beginning of the school year, when the teachers are assigned their class rosters, the SES of each student is noted. If there are students who have outstanding circumstances (e.g., no home computer, no family car, reside in a single parent household, etc.) the teachers are informed. They are also informed as to which students receive free/reduced lunches, which is 14% of school population.<sup>2</sup> The CT stated that he wants this information because it helps him to plan accordingly and better accommodate these students. As discussed in Nieto's article, it is clear that the CT practices "equal is not the same" in terms of SES, because he quietly acknowledges these students' lower class status and recognizes the possibility that it may influence their learning, and, he doesn't devalue them because of it—instead, he tries to help them by accommodating their needs (pg. 136-37).

There are two special education students in the third-hour class. A Para-pro is present in class each day in order to take notes on behalf of these students so that they can keep up. They are allowed to take special tests to accommodate their learning disabilities. The CT has no ELL students this year.

The physical environment of the classroom can best be described as sparse in comparison to some of the other classrooms at Abbott, and, the physical temperature, at least in the winter months, can best be described as cold. There are various college and professional sports team posters, political posters, and historical posters adorning the walls, but, in no particular order. The CT is a loyal Michigan fan and promotes the university by having a six foot tall painted wooden "M" hanging from the wall. Also displayed are antiqued reproductions of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. There is a U.S. flag plus several geographical maps. There is no student work displayed.

Also present in the classroom is a television and a computer, with the latter used exclusively by the CT. Regarding textual resources, each student is assigned a 1997 edition of The American Nation: Beginnings to 1877 (Prentice-Hall). It is the sole text used in the class; therefore, it is the most commonly used and assigned text. Students are permitted to take their textbooks home but are required to have them in class since the majority of the information being taught derives from it. The only other texts available in the room are dictionaries, thesauruses, and miscellaneous social studies books.

There are five rows of student desks positioned in the traditional way—facing the front of the classroom, and, the CT's desk, where he normally sits during class. Strategic seating is not practiced unless there are behavioral problems.<sup>3</sup> Students are simply seated alphabetically and remain in this order for the entire year. Displayed on the CT's desk are sports bobble-heads, a container of candy (student rewards), and a gavel, which he uses regularly and quite effectively to gain the students' attention.

The classroom's overall social environment appears to be amicable yet prescribed. I say this because once the students enter the classroom they immediately go to their seats and begin talking to whomever is sitting close to them, and, they don't seem to deviate from this practice. I have witnessed on numerous occasions, students of differing ethnicities conversing with each other as well as boys talking

to girls and visa-versa. Everyone seems to get along and is respectful of one another. It is definitely, as

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Nieto puts it, a "culturally compatible" classroom, because the dominant White group doesn't impose segregation onto the subordinate groups, which is conducive to camaraderie and learning because all of the students seem to feel at ease, comfortable, and safe (pgs. 147-48). Furthermore, because of this easy social interaction, all of the students' academic identities have been nurtured and they are willing to engage in academic tasks with and in front of each other.<sup>4</sup> I believe that they practice this because it is what the CT expects. He expects his students to respect each other, and him, while at the same time, he is attempting to construct students into what Lampert has coined, "intentional learners" who are "...interested in doing whatever they need to do to learn the subject" (pg. 265).

The CT is an expert at classroom management skills hence, the classroom routine, the norms, the climate, and the rules are all closely dictated and adhered to the majority of the time which lessens interference with the "productive activity" of learning U.S. history.<sup>5</sup> It does not appear that the students object to this regimental routine because they all seem relaxed and well-adjusted. The CT has made them aware of the boundaries and they rarely cross them. In short, through constant daily attention, the CT has successfully established an environment in which his students feel safe to do academic work with one another; thereby making it more likely that these students will engage in activities that will lead to learning which, of course, is the ultimate goal.<sup>6</sup>

According to the CT, he works independently most of the time. Occasionally, he collaborates with the other eighth-grade social studies teacher on assignments and planning. If there is a serious matter concerning one of the special education students, he meets with the special education teacher. Otherwise, they communicate through e-mail and notes. There are departmental meetings held once a week, one of which I attended. It was very brief and nothing significant was discussed on that day.

#### Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

From observing the CT and how he interacts with this heterogeneous class, it is obvious that he believes all of his students are capable of learning because he regularly practices what Ladson-Billings calls "culturally relevant teaching" in her chapter of the same name. As mentioned, the CT regularly takes into account the SES of his students, which according to Nieto, has been proposed as equally or

more important than ethnicity in influencing learning style (pg. 139). During our interview I learned that the CT also takes into account the home life and cultural differences of all his students learning styles, and, is what Nieto calls being "multiculturally sensitive"(pg. 147). And although the dominant culture of the classroom is White, I believe the CT is sensitive and attentive to *all* of his students needs because he consistently and unhesitatingly sets high goals for them—regardless of sex, race, or SES; thereby, practicing culturally relevant teaching. In addition, the CT routinely treats his students as competent; in return, they demonstrate competence.<sup>7</sup> He helps all of his students build upon their prior knowledge and their skills and by helping them reach the goals he has set for them in a variety of literacy practices such as writing, speaking, and reading.

Writing plays a large role in the CT's teaching. The students are required to take hand-written notes daily during lecture and then type them and create a notebook that is graded. This continual practice of writing and re-writing helps build scaffolding by engraining what they have read and heard. Oratorically speaking, the CT often incorporates conversation into his lessons. He is quite adept at consistently relating the subject matter being taught back to the students' own lives, thereby showing relevance and maintaining interest.<sup>8</sup> According to Ladson-Billings, this practice allows the "students' real-life experiences [to be] legitimized as they become part of the 'official' curriculum" and the helps the readings and its content to come alive (pg. 117). At least thirty minutes of text reading and writing homework is assigned Monday through Thursday. And as Ladson-Billings states, by having the students engage in these types of literacy activities that allow them to complete their homework successfully and contribute to discussion, it increases their levels of competence and confidence (pg. 111).

After observing the class on several occasions, I have concluded that the CT mostly practices the "banking" system. He supplies the students with content knowledge from the text, his own vast content knowledge, and his own vast life experiences that relate to the content being taught; therefore, the focus of the classroom is instructional.<sup>9</sup> The students don't seem to mind this—rather, they seem to enjoy listening to him because the CT regularly interjects humor into his lessons and interesting stories and is quite passionate about what it is he is teaching and it shows.

The community of the classroom is isolated. I have not seen any of the students work in pairs or groups. All of the work is done individually. However, they are allowed to share their notes.

No Child Left Behind Act and School Reform Efforts

According to the Assistant Principal, Abbott Middle School is currently meeting, and has consistently met, the requirements of the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) requirement since its implementation in 2001. Four teachers have had to change classroom assignments in order for Abbott to meet teacher quality requirements.

When asked during the interview if he sees any positive aspects of NCLB within the context of his classroom and school, the CT adamantly replied the following:<sup>10</sup>

No, absolutely not! In theory, in NCLB is a great idea. Like Communism, it's a great idea in theory, but it's never going to work. NCLB is unrealistic. If they are going to do this, it would be nice if they funded it. Most experts are even saying that it isn't going to work and the biggest problem is lack or waste of money. It is blatantly stupid to do that, that's my opinion.... I also think that there is too much emphasis on testing including the MEAP. Some kids don't test well, what about them? They need to take the teacher's word besides the testing.... NCLB is geared so that every kid is meant for Harvard or Yale. Let a kid pick what he wants to do—go to college or go into a trade. But, shop, woodworking, auto-mechanics are the first to get cut. The kids are the ones losing out. Then you have to consider, are people at the schools and districts going to cheat to meet the demands? School should be enjoyable for students and teachers alike and it isn't anymore. Don't make a kid fight windmills. The goal should be to make the kid successful. I am dead against NCLB.

When asked if NCLB has caused him to change his curriculum, he replied:

Yea, to accommodate all of the testing. As a result, I have had to cut my curriculum and some is important stuff that shouldn't be cut. You will see; you will be in this position. They say you are a professional. If you are a professional, why doesn't your say mean anything? We are going to end up losing these kids. They are kids, have we have forgotten that? They should want to come to school to learn; not be tested repeatedly. Education is so much more than ramming a test down a kid's throat.

When asked, are there any particular school reforms that Abbott or you have recently adopted?

We work a lot on NCA and PLC's. NCA is where goals are set for the school and we try and target problems and try and work for them...we have been very involved in that. PLC meetings are ideas to try new things in education.

After reading Kimmelman's article, it became clearer to me how and why NCLB came to be enacted into law.<sup>11</sup> For example, here are some of the reasons: U.S. students doing poorly compared to international counterparts; minority, special education, ESL, and students with a lower SES tended to fall further behind; under-qualified teachers allowed to teach classes that they weren't qualified to teach. However, and in contrast, after reading the Diamond and Spillane article and the Ambrosio article, and interviewing a CT with thirty-five years of experience, I would have to say that there are a lot more negative and corrosive aspects to NCLB as opposed to positive aspects, several which are mentioned in the above interview. I would have to agree with John Ambrosio when he states, "The irony—and the tragedy—is that the schools and students the law is supposed to help are precisely the ones it hurts most" (pg. 5). The only positive aspects of NCLB that I agree with are the following points that Ambrosio

makes in his article: that a school is forced to better address diversity of student population; students are allowed to transfer to a better performing school (if they are even allowed in); NCLB requires teachers to work harder and perhaps better; and that NCLB provides better services for minority, special education, and ESL students. I believe that Abbott Middle School has implemented these aspects.

It is obvious that some major changes will have to be made if the NCLB Act is going to succeed. Or, it may actually become necessary, as Ambrosio puts it, "As educators, we must speak out and organize against this very clear and present 'weapon of mass destruction,' for it is aimed at the heart of public education" (pg. 6). In any case, it is clear to me that NCLB is not working as it now stands.

#### Social Class

In comparing Abbott's textual resources and literacy practices to the four types of schools and communities as described in Jean Anyon's article, "Social Class and School Knowledge," I have concluded that Abbott resembles not just one type of school, but, two types of schools—the "middle class school" and the "affluent professional school." The reason is because of the demographic and ethnographic data regarding Abbott's student population. For example, 61.2% of Abbott parents have at least a bachelor's degree; 22.8% of Abbott parents earn between \$100,000-149,000 per year and 30% earn over \$150,000 per year; and the median annual household income is \$91,661 (1999).<sup>12</sup> So, based on the preceding data, Abbott most resembles the middle class and the affluent professional schools due to the social class of the *majority* of its student population. Because of this, and according to Anyon, social class positively impacts both the cultural capital of students and the amount and type of knowledge that they are exposed to at school, and in turn, strongly affects their literacy practices (pg. 6). Similar to the middle class and affluent professional schools, Abbott teachers tend to teach more conceptual ideas from the texts, emphasize individual thinking, and stress higher education—traits Anyon suggests are inherent to both these types of schools (pgs. 14,18,22,23,32). According to the CT, and in agreement with Lareau's article, he has noticed that the upper-middle and middle class parents tend to be more involved in their children's education, leading to better and higher achievement by these students (pg. 83).

As far as noticing social class differences between students, the CT said that students of the same SES tend to group together, but, this not always the rule. He also stated that he has not seen these differences played out in the classroom. The CT claims that he does not publicly acknowledge the social class differences between his students nor does he treat them differently based on their social class. And from observation, I would have to say that the CT does not believe that the cultural capital of his upper-middle and middle class students is intrinsically more valuable than that of his lower class students.<sup>13</sup>

In regards to parental involvement, the CT expects his students' parents to check their child's agenda everyday. By doing this, a written communiqué occurs on a daily basis. Parents also have access to their child's grades on-line. When it comes to helping students who have little or no parental involvement with their school work, The CT tries not to assign projects that he knows the students won't be able to complete due to lack of help; he prefers not to put students in a position that is unattainable.

#### Tracking

According to the Assistant Principal, Abbott does not practice tracking and all of the classes are comprised of students with mixed ability. In addition, the only classes that come close to tracking are the advanced math classes, and even those classes are open to any student who makes a request. They do try and push for the minorities to enroll in these classes, and they try to encourage female students to enroll. The CT concurred with the Assistant Principal's statements, but, he then added that he has often noticed that certain classrooms are questionable in their composition and has often wondered, "Did the computer just happen to throw the class list out like this?" Due to the CT's statement, it has made me wonder if Abbott does actually track, but, without confirmation, I cannot be sure.

However, I hope that Abbott doesn't track based on the findings by Jeannie Oakes, and here are a few of the reasons why: tracking reproduces students' social/racial positions, in other words, once students are categorized or labeled, they tend to retain these categorizations/labels for the remainder of their schooling, thereby making it almost impossible for students in the lower categories to move "up the ladder"; lower placements tend to lower student self-esteem perpetuating lower achievement; students do not learn better when they are grouped with students similar to them academically; life-altering decisions



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are made by counselors and teachers who barely know the students; and finally and most importantly, ... "in the tracking process, it seems the odds are not quite equal. It turns out that those children who seem to have the least of everything in the rest of their lives most often get less at school as well" (pg. 5).

#### Race/Ethnicity and Schooling

During my time at Abbott I have not noticed any subtractive elements besides the textbook that is currently being used in the eighth-grade social studies classes in which "White history" is definitely the main focus. Important topics such as slavery, civil rights, the plight of the Native American, etc., is covered, but, not enough. The CT stated that he supplements this lack of minority representation by giving equal opportunity to individual minority groups through interesting historical stories and facts. The CT has mentioned that they are in the process of purchasing new U.S. history texts and are consciously looking for an edition that gives more attention to the history of minorities.

Currently, Abbott's Code of Conduct is published in English. However, the CT said that if requested, it could and would be reproduced in any language. He also stated that exceptions are made for certain ELL students when it comes to standardized testing.

The CT feels that the biggest border that students face at both Abbott and West Bloomfield High School (where most of Abbott students will attend) is their SES. There are students who range from being very wealthy to those who are poor and it is the latter that he feels will experience ramifications due to their SES. As Phelan suggests in her article, "Socioeconomic borders are generated when economic circumstances create severe limitations, i.e., a student may have to work outside of the home thus making school participation ... difficult or impossible. Or a student...may be precluded from involvement with peers whose economic circumstances are greater"(pg. 58).

I have already addressed the race and ethnicity aspects of the third-hour class in the "Background Information" section and the "Culturally Responsive Pedagogy" section.

#### Overall Reflection

What I have learned most about the work of teaching as a result of this study is very similar to what Nieto discusses. I have learned how extremely important it is that teachers recognize and take into

consideration the individual student's gender, race, ethnicity, language, social class, family life, and psychological/emotional differences. And that when a teacher over-generalizes these aspects, stereotypes can be formed that can lead to flawed conclusions about an individual student's abilities and intelligence, which then has the potential to end with disastrous results. The answer, therefore, is that teachers, and administrators, need to learn to recognize that although a student's culture may *influence* who they are, it does not *determine* who they are (pgs. 136-37). In short, I hope to be a teacher who is sensitive to *all* of my students' various learning needs and styles, or, in other words, I hope to be "multiculturally sensitive," which I have been fortunate enough to regularly observe and hear first-hand within the classroom I have been studying.

At this point, the only lingering questions I have has to do with NCLB. I have had the opportunity to speak to several educators who "live" NCLB on a daily basis and most of their feedback has been negative about NCLB—this worries me and makes me want to ask: how will NCLB affect me and my teaching career? Will teaching be more stressful and less enjoyable due to the rigorous and unrealistic demands of NCLB? My hope is that by the time I finish school and am working as a teacher, NCLB will have been rectified and will no longer be hurting the schools and students that the law was originally supposed to help.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> 19 January 2008 <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/school-detail.asp?Search=1&InstName=Abbott=Mi>.
- <sup>2</sup> 19 January 2008 <http://www.schoolmatters.com/schools.aspx/q/page=sp/sid=16965>.
- <sup>3</sup> M. Lampert, Teaching Problems and the Problems of Teaching (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001) 279.
- <sup>4</sup> Lampert 265-66.
- <sup>5</sup> Lampert 266.
- <sup>6</sup> Lampert 267.
- <sup>7</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).
- <sup>8</sup> Ladson-Billings 109.
- <sup>9</sup> Ladson-Billings 124.
- <sup>10</sup> Interview conducted with the CT on March 6, 2008. Some parts have been paraphrased.
- <sup>11</sup> P.L. Kimmelman, Education Events that Led to Implementing NCLB: Creating a Knowledge Framework to Support School Improvement (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press) 1-25.
- <sup>12</sup> 19 January 2008 <http://www.schoolmatters.com/schools.aspx/q/page=sp/sid=16965>.
- <sup>13</sup> Annette Lareau, "Social Class Differences in Family-School Relationships: The Importance of Cultural Capital," Sociology of Education 1987, Vol. 60 (April) 73-85.
- <sup>14</sup> John Ambrosio, "No Child Left Behind: The Case of Roosevelt High," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 2004.

**NOTE:** In regards to the tracking section of this study, I attempted on several occasions to observe one of the advanced math classes at Abbott in order to see the class composition, but without success.

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