

From the Editor

By Lyn Miller-Lachmann

When I taught high school in New York City, students would come to me from time to time with problems they faced—problems with parents, peers, employers, and even other teachers. Hearing about difficulties with other teachers posed a special dilemma for me, a relative newcomer to the school. I didn't want to undermine the authority of my colleagues, and I must admit I also felt a secret pleasure at being considered better than teachers with far more experience. I listened to my students' concerns and tried to validate their feelings, but never did I speak to my department chair or any other administrator about what I heard. Once, several students in my homeroom described a white teacher in my department who repeatedly put down members of the class using ethnic or racial stereotypes and stated that none of them would pass the class, much less graduate high school.

The following year my husband found a job halfway across the country, and I left my teaching position to join him. Some years later I read a news item that one of my former colleagues—the teacher about whom my students had complained—had been suspended for comments in class that touched off a student walkout and demonstration. A racially charged remark about the superiority of the apartheid government in South Africa (this was during the 1980s) over the black leadership of other African nations sparked student anger, but this was merely the last of a long line of remarks that implied the educational and social inferiority of African, African-American, and Latino peoples. In a school with a student body that was one-third African American and two-thirds Latino (mostly Puerto Rican but also with many immigrants from Central America), it was only a matter of time before students called this teacher on his insensitive behavior in a more organized fashion than simply complaining to other teachers.

The suspension of my colleague drove home two points that I still haven't forgotten. One is the code of silence among professionals that allows dangerously incompetent individuals to continue to practice. At first glance, one may not place an openly racist teacher in the same category of peril as a drug-addicted doctor or suicidal airline pilot who holds the lives of many in his or her hands. But teachers do hold the hopes and dreams and promise of young people in their hands, and a teacher who shatters a child's faith in the educational system and in his or her future can destroy that child's entire life. Among those people filling our prisons—the most populous, per capita, in the world—are many whom the schools failed first. And my own unwillingness to go to my department chair—a function of my feeling of intimidation as a second-year teacher barely older than my students, my desire not to “rock the boat,” and my smug satisfaction at knowing I was better than my colleagues—led to the continuation for years, at 180 students a semester, of my colleague's malpractice.

The second point I recognized from this incident is the importance of cultural competency in teaching. When I first began teaching in a high school with an exclusively Latino and African-American population, I knew little about cultural competency, about how I could cross the divide between my own white upper-middle-class upbringing and the far different backgrounds of my students. What I did have was a desire to meet my students halfway and an interest in their lives.

My experience paralleled that of James C. Jupp, who began his career in education in Mexico in the 1980s and has spent most of his career teaching Mexican-American students, first in south Texas and then in Austin. He writes in “Culturally Relevant Teaching: One Teacher's Journey Through Theory and Practice,” the lead article in this issue: “My particular rite of passage was discovering that my cultural frame was irrelevant and understanding that I needed to learn immediately what was relevant—not to myself, but to my students and the communities in which I worked.” His article presents the steps necessary for teachers to cross the borders between their own cultures and those of their students—steps that include self-awareness, dialogue with students and with others from the community, and the establishment of a caring environ-

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▼ continued on page 11


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The **University of South Carolina Press** is pleased to announce that *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference* by Ananda Abeysekara was selected to receive the American Academy of Religion's Award for the Best First Book in the History of Religions. Abeysekara received the award on November 22, 2003, at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in Atlanta.

Colors of the Robe sheds new light on the Sri Lankan Buddhist universe of ethics and politics and suggests innovative directions for the global study of religion, identity, culture, politics, and violence. The author conducted extensive field research in Sri Lanka and in his study illustrates how different meanings of religious and national concepts come into central view and then fade. For more information on this and other University of South Carolina Press titles, visit the press's web site, www.sc.edu/uscpres.

In June 2003 the **W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University** published *Freedom on My Mind*, a 77-page volume to celebrate

the life and work of Richard Newman. Newman, a minister and scholar instrumental in the establishment of the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard, died of a brain tumor one month after the book's publication. Newman served as the Religion Subject Editor of *MultiCultural Review* from 1992 to 1994 and worked closely with *MCR*'s founding editor, Brenda Mitchell-Powell.

Freedom on My Mind includes an introductory essay written by Newman entitled "My Life in African-American Studies" followed by Pamela Pietro's biographical sketch and a "Memoir of a Friendship" by Randall K. Burkett. Most of the volume consists of a bibliography of Newman's books, articles, reviews, and letters dating from 1955 to 2002. There is also an index and a half dozen black-and-white photos from various stages of Newman's life. This well-produced and fitting tribute to a major scholar in religion and black studies is available through the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research, 12 Quincy St., Barker Center, Cambridge, MA 02138, www.fas.harvard.edu/~du_bois/. 

ment—▼ from the editor continued from page 4 along with recommended readings that can help other teachers achieve competency with language minority and culturally diverse students. Finally, he draws on his own journey to present two units he developed for older elementary and middle school students, one on south Texas folklore and the other on reflective essay writing.

Patricia Espiritu Halagao's article, "Teaching Filipino-American Students," focuses on cultural competency with another community, one of the fastest-growing immigrant groups in the United States today. Unlike Jupp, who sees himself as a border-crosser offering his experience to other teachers from middle-class Anglo backgrounds, Halagao comes from the community she describes. Currently a professor at the University of Hawaii, she has taught at the K-12 level and worked with Filipino-American educators and artists over the years to develop a list of suggestions for teachers of students who trace their heritage to the Philippines. Some of her suggestions build on core elements of Philippines and Filipino-American culture; for example, she calls on teachers to "build a *bayanihan* or spirit of community in the classroom" that takes advantage of the Filipino-American student's sense of responsibility to the family and community. In other instances, she urges teachers to work with students and families to help them overcome the colonial mindset that perceives their culture as inferior; students should be encouraged to share their ethnic identity, to research the history and contributions of their people, and to "speak their minds." She promotes the arts as a means of helping ordinarily reticent students to express themselves and cites a variety of Filipino-American visual and performing artists as role models in this area.

Role models for a variety of immigrant students may be found through literature. Regular feature writer Patricia

Goldblatt analyzes three books that depict the encounter between immigrant and mainstream cultures in her article "School Is Still the Place: Stories of Immigration and Education." T. C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* portrays the colonialist relationships between Latino immigrants and their supposedly enlightened Anglo employers in southern California; the short stories in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* portray the interactions among South Asian immigrant women, their husbands, and their American neighbors; and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* presents characters in a multicultural London in conflict with each other and with the city's staid, homogenous culture of earlier decades.

Completing this special issue on cultural competency in education is an interview with the noted Puerto Rican poet Martín Espada. Espada, the author of numerous volumes of poetry and the editor of the widely used teaching anthology *Poetry Like Bread*, spoke to librarian Catherine Crohan and me before a reading he gave at Siena College in Loudonville, New York, last March. He talked about growing up in New York City, the role his father played in the development of his political consciousness, the poet's relationship to society in times of war, his use of two languages as a means of expressing his Latino identity, and the rich literary traditions coming out of Spain and Latin America that have influenced Latino writers and readers. His insights offer a direct challenge to teachers like my former colleague and pundits in the media and mainstream society who see Latino culture as inferior and Latinos as a group without a literary heritage. From the actions of students who refused to accept a teacher's belittlement to the work of talented writers like Espada, we see that Latino culture is rich and multidimensional, reflecting a long history of syncretism and struggle. And what is true for Latinos is true for other groups whose cultures and histories are still too often ignored or dismissed. 