

# Using Personal Culture Framework to Enhance Multicultural Classrooms of Deaf and Hard of Hearing students Along the Border

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigated the 17 cultural variables to consider when teaching students who are culturally and linguistically different. The variables were drawn from the Personal Culture Framework developed by Fletcher-Carter and Páez in 1996. Identification and understanding of these variables helps teachers to see where they are similar or different compared to their deaf and hard of hearing students and develop more appropriate educational strategies and materials. The 17 cultural variables are classified among 4 cultural dimensions and across 5 loci of influence which impact a D/HH child's learning. Completion of the Framework can lead to the identification of cultural similarities and differences between teachers and their students. An inventory of these differences and similarities can then help teachers to develop and execute instructional strategies to better reflect the cultural experiences of their students.

## Introduction

The population of school-age children in the United States is becoming more diverse. The percentage of culturally and linguistically diverse students in the United States has increased from 29.6% of the total population of students in 1986 to 35.8% of the total student population in 1996 (Snyder, Hoffman, & Geddes, 1999). Similarly, the number of deaf and hard-of-hearing (D/HH) students from other racial groups has increased, especially in the Hispanic and Asian/

Pacific Islanders populations while actually, D/HH European-American school age population has declined over the past three decades (Holden-Pitt & Diaz, 1998). As a result, D/HH students are increasingly placed in classrooms with teachers and students from ethnic backgrounds different from their own. Teachers in this complex multicultural situation need a means to help them cross some of the cultural barriers that exist between themselves and students. One such tool is Personal Culture Framework developed by Fletcher-Carter and Páez (1996). This study investigated the multicultural teaching practices of teachers serving deaf and hard of hearing students and impacted positively these teachers' multicultural teaching strategies and materials through the application of the Personal Culture Framework.

#### Theoretical and Conceptual Basis for the Framework

Broadly conceptualized, teachers can positively impact the academic success of culturally diverse D/HH students through the acquisition of cultural sensitivity awareness, knowledge, and understanding (Páez & Fletcher-Carter, 2000). The Personal Culture Framework is based on the premise that, because every person has a framework of cultural background, effective multicultural teachers positively recognize and accept the diversity of children within the classroom. In developing the Personal Culture Framework, Fletcher-Carter and Páez (1997, 2000) assumed that a student who is both D/HH and a member of an underrepresented racial and/or ethnic group has a less well known and, therefore, less well-understood cultural background than a D/HH student with a European-American background. In this context, it must be recognized that teachers who work with culturally distinct D/HH students also view the world from their own unique perspectives—culturally, ethnically, and also as regards disabilities. The Framework is intended to aid teachers of D/HH students in acquiring knowledge and skills to provide a multicultural curriculum reflecting various personal cultures, including the special needs issues of their students.

#### Teachers and Students with Different Cultural Backgrounds

Students with diverse backgrounds bring into the classrooms their individual cultural values, beliefs, languages, socioeconomic status, political convictions, religions, and other cultural factors (Meath-Lang, 1996). When teachers and students have different racial, ethnic, physical, and/or linguistic backgrounds, cross-cultural interaction networks emerge in the classroom. If all the parties recognize and value this, there can be an effective learning environment can exist (Cruz & Duff, 1997). However, traditional education in the U.S. is centered on western European culture, with little emphasis on minority cultures, or their contributions to literature, sciences, and other areas. Ignoring these cultures in the classroom creates learning difficulties for many children, especially those from traditionally underrepresented groups (Baca & de Valenzuela, 1998). Cultural conflicts develop when teachers and students do not share the same *micro and/or macro* cultural variables (Sierichs, 1994). Where the two distinct cultures meet, there is confrontation, conflict, misunderstanding, argument, or alienation. Such situations can lead to communication breakdown between students and teachers, if the latter do not know how the former conveys information (Gagliardi, 1995). For example,

there is a notable disparity in school achievement between European-American deaf children and deaf children of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Cohen, 1997). Besides factors of socioeconomic status, language issues, and parental involvement, the educational achievement disparity is also due to teachers not meeting the educational needs of culturally diverse students (Gallavan, 1998)

#### Diverse Students' Learning

There is a need for teachers to be trained to teach in a multicultural context because of the positive correlation between a student's culture and certain learning styles (Gagliardi, 1995). Gagliardi cites the example that students from a culture without mathematical concepts have difficulty with mathematics. Cultural factors such as customs, lifestyles, learning styles, and immigration status affect both regular and special education students' learning abilities (Grossman, 1995). However, many teachers lack the knowledge and the preparation needed for working with diverse populations (Avery & Walker, 1993). Avery and Walker found that less than 20% of pre-service teachers were willing to teach in diverse settings. In the same study, approximately 40% of the pre-service teachers interviewed responded that their training did not prepare them to teach in diverse environments. Since students differ in information acquisition, personal traits, interests, and desires, the curriculum for a culturally diverse classroom should address the needs of culturally different learners and reflect cultural diversity. The curriculum must enable students to learn more efficiently (Gagliardi, 1995). Grossman (1995) advocates teachers working in ethnically diverse schools need to be skilled in understanding students' cultural backgrounds in such matters as their religious beliefs, values, customs, lifestyles, and learning styles. They also need to be supportive of how immigration status and economic conditions affect their students' learning abilities. Grossman added that a lack of those skills could induce educators to give unintentionally poor diagnostic or inappropriate evaluations for students' individual education plans (IEPs). Possessing those skills will help teachers develop goals that fit student needs, or teach in instructional styles that match the students' culturally influenced learning styles (Obiakor, 1997). To meet the challenge of providing an equal education, authors such as Grossman, 1995, Obiakor, 1997, recommend the inclusion of multicultural education in all areas of school curricula, and not just as a separate subject matter.

Fletcher-Carter and Pérez (1997, 2000) stated that teachers have the primary responsibility for exposing culturally diverse deaf children to their ethnic roots and their Deaf culture. Students who are from non-European backgrounds experience educational achievement problems due to many factors, such as racism, discrimination, and expectations of students' achievement (Nieto, 2000). As with their hearing peers, there is a notable disparity in school achievement between European-American deaf children and deaf children of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, such as African-American and Hispanic (Andrews & Jordan, 2000). For example, Schildroth and Hotto (1995) found that 65% of European-American students graduated with diplomas, while only 35% of minority students.

#### Importance of Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is a concept that encourages equity in

educational systems for all students, regardless of their racial/ethnic background, socioeconomic class, ability/disability, religion, or gender (Grant & Tate, 1995). The goal of multicultural teaching is to enable all children to develop a greater sense of appreciating themselves and other individuals. Teaching materials and methods should lead the whole class to recognize and value the contributions of all groups in the development of America (Tiedt & Tiedt, 1986). However, a survey conducted by Gallavan (1998) found that most teachers do not practice effective multicultural education because of the lack of understanding about multicultural education or because their schools do not emphasize multicultural issues. The findings on diverse students' learning point to the need for teachers in a multicultural situation to present a multicultural education, in order to provide effective and appropriate education to students with diverse backgrounds (Welch, 2000). For a successful multicultural education of D/HH students, Cohen (1997) recommends an approach within the school or program that openly discusses the issue of racism without resorting to defensive or denial tactics. Schools need to pay equal attention to students from minority backgrounds by giving them the opportunity to develop leadership skills, and by encouraging and supporting their parents' involvement in education.

#### Exploring Students' Personal Cultures

It is important for teachers to make an inventory of their students' cultural backgrounds in order to know and serve them better. Rothenberg, McDermott, and Gormley (1997) found that teachers who are strangers to the cultures of their students have a tendency to believe mass media's negative images about low-income students of diverse races. To combat this pattern, schools serving D/HH students should familiarize themselves with their students' backgrounds, especially regarding race, gender, and social class, since these cultural factors have direct effects on the educational attainment of D/HH students (Schildroth & Hotto, 1996). It has also been noted that a family's income has an impact on the age of diagnosis of deafness and the search for remedial services, such as early intervention for oral language development. Income impacts parents' readiness to select a private or public institution for their D/HH children. If the application of the Personal Culture Framework positively influences teachers and assists them in better addressing the multicultural educational needs of their D/HH students, then the results of this study will be important to students, teachers, parents, school administrators, and teacher trainers. If, with the use of the Framework, teachers can measurably alter instructional environments, materials, pedagogical approaches, and activities to more appropriately reflect their students' cultures/ethnic backgrounds, students will receive effective and appropriate education.

#### Personal Culture Framework

In developing the Personal Culture Framework Fletcher-Carter and Páez (1997, 2000) purport that the personal culture of each child is different even from his/her parents and is the result of family, neighborhood, vicinity/community, school influences, and the child's self-image. They posit that an exploration of these personal cultures by teachers and other professionals could greatly enhance the learning environment and positively influence the educational experiences

of students and their families via the creation of a multicultural educational environment.

The Framework has four sections: (a) Demographics, (b) Cultural Dimensions and Variables, (c) Curricular Strategy, and (d) Definitions.

**Section 1: Demographics:** The first section gathers demographic information on the student. The person who completes the form writes down key words/phrases to complete each cell in the Personal Culture Framework for each of the variables identified under the four primary dimensions of cultures (See Table 1).

**Section 2: Cultural Dimensions and Variables:** There are 17 cultural that under four cultural dimensions that users of the Personal Culture Framework can note which variables are shared or not shared across the five loci columns (see Table 2).

**Table 1**  
Personal Culture Framework: Demographic information.

**Child's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **DOB:** \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

**Guardian's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Relationship:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Guardian's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Relationship:** \_\_\_\_\_

<b>School</b>	<b>Personnel</b>	<b>Completing</b>	<b>Form:</b>
<b>Name:</b> _____		<b>Title:</b> _____	
<b>Name:</b> _____		<b>Title:</b> _____	

**Cultural Brokers:**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Relationship to child:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Community Position:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Relationship to child:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Community Position:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of framework completion:** \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

**Date of framework revision:** \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

**Section 3: Curricular Strategy:** In the third section of the Framework, users can transfer the variables not shared from the cultural dimensions to the curricular strategy section. Teachers and cultural brokers then, generate educational strategies for adapting the curriculum and methodology and content in the context of the cultural variables not shared (see Table 3).

Cultural Dimensions of the Personal Culture Framework

The Personal Culture Framework has four cultural dimensions with 17 variables. Each dimension and its variables are treated separately.

Table 2  
Personal Culture Framework: Cultural dimensions and variables.

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ L \_\_\_\_\_ O \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_ U \_\_\_\_\_ S \_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Dimensions	Variables	Family	Vicinity/ Neighborhood	Community	School	Child
Cultural	Demographic Influences					
Values	Verbal Behaviors					
Attitudes	Nonverbal/Behaviors					
Behaviors	Achievement Orientation/ Education Level					
	Temporal Orientation					
	Thinking/Cognitive Process					
	Religious/Spiritual Affiliation					
	Leisure Activities					
Sense of Group	Dominant Ethnic Identity					
Membership	U.S. Generational Context					
	Socioeconomic Status					
	Decision-Making/Action-Taking Attitudes					
	Observances					
	Family Definition					
Experiences	Immigration Status					
Associated	Residence Status					
with	Experience with Racism					
Minority Status						
Transforming	Normal Life Events					
Life Events	Critical Life Events					

Table 3  
Personal Culture Framework: Curricular strategy.

	LOCUS	CURRICULAR
	STRATEGY	
	F = family	
	N = neighborhood	
CULTURAL VARIABLES	V = vicinity/ community	
	S = school	
	C = child	
	F N V S C	
	F N V S C	

### Cultural Dimension 1: Cultural Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors

The 8 variables under this cultural dimension are (1) Demographic Influences, (2) Verbal Behaviors, (3) Nonverbal/Behaviors, (4) Achievement Orientation/ Education Level, (5) Temporal Orientation, (6) Thinking/Cognitive Process, (7) Religious/Spiritual Affiliation, and (8) Leisure Activities. Cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors refer to what one believes and how one behaves as a result of those beliefs. These values, attitudes, and behaviors are defined via eight variables that influence an individual or an organization's cultural perspective and actions in this dimension (Nieto, 2000).

### Cultural Dimension 2: Sense of Group Membership

The six variables under the second cultural dimension are: (1) Dominant Ethnic Identity, (2) U.S. Generational Context, (3) Socioeconomic Status, (4) Decision-Making/Action-Taking Attitudes, (5) Observances, and (6) Family Definition: The sense of group membership encases the sense of belonging to a group or to an identity larger than oneself. It has six variables that explain how an individual views his/her attachment to a particular group (Nieto, 2000).

### Cultural Dimension 3: Experiences Associated with Minority Status

The third cultural dimension deals with the experiences that are associated with minority status in a society (i.e., the U.S.). This variable is composed of 3 sub-variables: (1) Immigration Status, (2) Residence Status, and (3) Experience with Racism. Membership in a minority group within any country has a particular value of influence on one's cultural framework (Miller, 1995).

### Cultural Dimension 4: Transforming Life Events

There are two variables associated with transforming life events: (1) Normal Life Events and (2) Critical Life Events. Life is measured, to a large degree, by transforming life events. These constitute milestones by which life paths are evaluated. These events cross one's entire life span. Life events can be positive or physically and emotionally challenging (Meadow-Orleans, Mertens, Sass-Lehrer, & Scott-Olson, 1997).

### Loci of Influences

The second part of the Personal Culture Framework outlines 5 loci: (a) family, (b) neighborhood, (c) vicinity/community, (d) school, and (e) child of influence, as explained by Fletcher-Carter & Páez, (1997, 2000). These are the locations in which the influences of cultural values, sense of group membership, experiences associated with minority status, and transforming life events take place. They are based on the sociological conception of human organizations. Each locus is viewed in a global perspective. For example, family means extended family as well as nuclear family. This section of the literature review covers how cultural dimension influence the 5 loci (Nybo, Scherman, & Freeman, 1998).

### Discussion and Conclusion

The demographics of American students have changed over the last decade, including an increase in D/HH students, due, in part, to a noticeably higher birth rate within certain ethnic groups, as well as to recent immigration patterns. Each ethnic group has its own cultural identity. Deaf people have a distinct Deaf culture in addition to their original racial or ethnic cultural background. As with

their hearing counterparts, the D/HH student population is racially and ethnically more diverse than the population of teachers serving them. The phenomenon of diverse student bodies points to the need for a tool to more effectively enable teachers to cross the multicultural barriers of today's classrooms, thus assisting students from varied backgrounds. One such promising tool is the application of the Personal Culture Framework developed by Páez and Fletcher-Carter (1996). This Framework is proposed for teachers to effectively prepare for cultural and linguistic differences between themselves and their students. This study explored the effectiveness of the Framework and initiates the process for its validation.

Initial investigation with five teachers as participants reported the Framework as very informative, especially about cultures. The effectiveness of the Framework was evidenced when the participating teachers were able to (a) identify the nature and extent of cultural diversity between their students and themselves, and (b) integrate more appropriate culturally diverse strategies and materials into their teaching. The Framework facilitated their understanding of their students and D/HH people's distinct cultures. It also provided deeper information about their students' cultures than they would have gained otherwise. The participants also found the Framework helpful because it helped them to think about cultural backgrounds and incorporate them into their teaching. All the participants identified parents as the best cultural brokers. Participants also recommended that it would be useful for teachers to visit the students' homes. A home visit would enable the teachers to better understand each student's home environment and the influence each environment had on the school. Two of the participants suggested the Framework could be most useful if completed early when a child enters the educational system. An earlier beginning to the collection of this cultural data on the student would allow schools to use the information throughout the child's schooling. While additional research is needed to investigate the validity of the Personal Culture Framework this tool is extremely useful in determining the multicultural needs and issues of minority Deaf /HH students and their families.

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