Chapter 2

Teachers’ Beliefs About Knowledge

To be honest, I never even knew that there was such a thing as European dominant anything! I thought history was what it was, life is what it is, no matter whose perspective you are looking from.

(White elementary teacher, November 23, 2003)

I started thinking, what is making me question my own belief system and what I’ve always been fed? . . . Reading things like this, and thinking about, well what’s causing me to transform? It takes a really powerful example. . . . Hearing something over and over again, you hear it once and you think, oh, yeah, whatever. But you keep hearing it and you start questioning it. . . . But it’s like, it has to be something really powerful like that, or repetitive, in the scope of things, to make people change their minds.

(Asian American elementary teacher, September 8, 2001)

The teachers above reflected on how difficult it is to see and confront one’s basic beliefs about knowledge. The White elementary teacher had always assumed that the version of history in textbooks represented unbiased truth, until she had to critically examine her assumption from vantage points of histories told by subordinate groups. The Asian American elementary teacher viewed learning to recognize her own assumptions as a difficult process since deeply embedded assumptions are not only hard to see but are also useful for ordering one’s understanding of everyday life.

Teachers’ beliefs about the nature of knowledge have important implications for designing and teaching multicultural curriculum, so I usually start work on curriculum by helping teachers identify and critically reflect on what they take as truth. Developing curriculum that is relevant to and engages students, in contexts in which there is already a considerable amount of prescribed curriculum, requires teachers to judge what is most worth teaching and knowing in order to identify space in which they can invite and work with students’ knowledge and interests. Developing multicultural curriculum requires teachers to evaluate knowledge in terms of the sociopolitical context of the community from which it comes, and to judge what difference it makes who authors any given body of knowledge. In addition, developing intellectually rich curriculum requires thinking through not just what facts and information are worth consuming, but also what the intellectual basis of knowledge is. Further, curriculum development requires considering not only how students learn to consume knowledge, but also how they learn to evaluate and produce it. This chapter first explores connections between teachers’ beliefs about knowledge and curriculum, then discusses various processes for self-reflection, with some specific examples of how teachers have responded to those processes.

TEACHERS’ BELIEFS

Bartolome and Trueba (2000) recommended that, before teachers can work well with multicultural teaching, they need to develop ideological clarity. By this they mean

the process by which individuals struggle to identify both the dominant society’s explanations for the existing socioeconomic and political hierarchy and their own explanations of the social order and any resulting inequalities. Ideological clarity requires that teachers’ individual explanations be compared and contrasted with those propagated by the dominant society. The juxtaposing of ideologies, hopefully, forces teachers to better understand if, when, and how their belief systems uncritically reflect those of the dominant society and support unfair and inequitable conditions. (p. 279)

Their words echo those of Freire (1998), who maintained that “I cannot be a teacher if I do not perceive with ever greater clarity that my practice demands of me a definition about where I stand” (p. 93). Even though the work of teachers is structured and constrained institutionally through accountability systems, as well as through other conditions of teachers’ work, such as class size (Connell, 1985), teachers have agency to make decisions.

For example, consider two different perspectives about what multicultural curriculum might look like: a cultural difference perspective and an antiracist perspective (see Brandt, 1986, p. 12). The cultural difference perspective focuses on building consensus and understanding about cultural differences, and getting along. The antiracist perspective focuses on challenging racial oppression and exploitation, and reconstructing racist systems to achieve equality of power across racial groups. Since the cultural
difference perspective fits with an ideology of the United States as a nation of immigrants, teachers often take it for granted as the only way to frame a multicultural curriculum, without recognizing alternatives. But curriculum based on an antiracist perspective is more likely to reflect points of view about the United States that are articulated by historically oppressed racial groups.

Now imagine a fourth-grade teacher who wants her mostly Anglo student population to develop some appreciation for people different from themselves. She develops and teaches a 2-week interdisciplinary unit on Native Americans that combines social studies, language arts, and art. The unit teaches a little bit about several different Indian tribes historically in terms of geographic location, social structure, and economic activities. Students read stories about Indian mythology and, as art projects, construct totem poles. On the surface, the teacher might believe that Native American people benefit from Anglos having experienced a unit like this, assuming it will lead them to treat Native Americans respectfully. But the unit is structured around a cultural difference perspective the teacher probably takes for granted. (Imagine, for example, teaching this unit but substituting European Americans for Native Americans.) In this case, her curriculum locates indigenous people in history rather than the present, assumes so much simplicity in the histories and social structures of widely diverse indigenous peoples that it actually ends up teaching stereotypes, may assume indigenous knowledge is the equivalent of childlike mythology that can be dipped into but doesn’t require serious study, and assumes that culture rather than the politics of conquest and sovereignty is what Anglos should learn. In other words, despite the teacher’s good intentions, and even if all of the “facts” in the unit were accurate, its basic underlying ideology is problematic. An antiracist curriculum would start by critically examining conquest and ongoing struggles for sovereignty (Bigelow & Peterson, 1998). A glimpse of what that might look like in a classroom is illustrated in Chapter 6.

Because assumptions guide what teachers do, it is worthwhile to spend time examining the basis on which one makes teaching decisions. Ideological beliefs come partially from prior life experiences. Generally people learn ideologies initially while growing up. Family members tell stories about family history and everyday life to teach how life works, who we are, where we come from, and what kinds of things are possible. Television, other media, and school curricula also teach ideologies through stories and imagery. For example, Gallegos (1998) described huge differences between the ideology about America in the curriculum he experienced growing up, and the ideology he learned from Mexican and Indian family members. “The stories about how the world works that I heard and learned growing up are so radically different from the explanations I learned in institutions that they are almost irreconcilable” (p. 244).

Several years ago I examined teachers’ conceptions of multicultural education (Sleeter, 1992). To a large extent, and to a greater degree than they realized, their conceptions were rooted in their life experiences and the communities with which they affiliated. Perspectives of the White teachers tended to differ from those of teachers of color, for example, regarding the centrality of racism to how schools work. Significantly, a White teacher whose perspective was similar to those of the African American teachers had sustained contact with African American adults. Teachers’ personal histories with social mobility also informed how they understood multicultural education, particularly the extent to which they subscribed to the meritocratic assumption that everyone needs to pull himself- or herself up by the bootstraps. Since ideology is rooted, at least in part, in life experience, uncovering taken-for-granted beliefs entails looking at how one interprets one’s life in relationship to that of others.

Epistemological beliefs are assumptions about the nature of knowledge and “reality.” They form initially at home and in school, and can develop as one gains education (Schommer, Calvert, Gariglietti, & Bajaj, 1997). Research on teachers’ and college students’ epistemological beliefs suggests three rough stages that lie along a continuum, through which people can grow (Schommer, 1998; White, 2000). At one end are those who hold absolutist beliefs, seeing knowledge as fixed and certain, outside the knower, and established by authority figures. At the other end of the continuum are reflective individuals, who see knowledge as situated within the context in which people create it; problems have multiple solutions, and truth claims can be evaluated on the basis of the veracity of evidence on which they rest. In the middle are relativists, who reject anchoring knowledge in established authorities, but not knowing how to use any other way to evaluate truth claims, assume that all perspectives are equally valid. At early stages of relativism, people tend to see all knowledge as resting on personal opinion and individual experience.

According to White (2000), roughly half of the adult population holds an absolutist perspective about the nature of knowledge, and only a small proportion holds a reflective perspective. In a study of preservice students, she found most holding a relativist perspective, which she suggested represents a move away from viewing knowledge as fixed and textbooks as absolutely true. As preservice students began to question the knowledge taught by textbooks and authority figures, they seemed to substitute personal opinion and experience for expert authority as the basis for judging truth. 1 White
observed that, as college students, most were only beginning to learn to evaluate what is true on the basis of evidence and reasoning rather than personal experience or external authority.

Learning to work with multiple perspectives, multiple frames of reference, and multiple funds of knowledge is at the heart of multicultural curriculum design. So, as a heuristic device to examine teachers' epistemological beliefs and to help them reflect on their own assumptions, I and my colleagues in the Visible Knowledge Project developed an analytical framework that appears in Table 2.1. It describes a rough progression of levels in learning to think complexly about multicultural curriculum, illustrating what teacher thinking might look like at emerging, developing, and accomplished levels. The framework includes four dimensions along which epistemological beliefs can be examined: task definition, perspective taking, self-reflexivity, and locus of decision making. The set of assumptions labeled Emerging correspond to what White (2000) characterized as absolutist thinking. Those labeled Developing correspond to relativist thinking; and those labeled as Accomplished, to reflective thinking.3

Every time I teach a multicultural education course, I struggle to help teachers reflect on their own assumptions. The next section discusses processes I have used to help teachers identify and reflect on their ideological and epistemological assumptions. A use for Table 2.1 is suggested in that context.

**TEACHERS REFLECT ON THEIR BELIEFS**

Throughout the Multicultural Curriculum Design course, I use various strategies that are designed to prompt teachers to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions. These strategies include: (1) studying the concepts of ideology and epistemology, (2) reading works that are written from multiple ideological perspectives, (3) engaging in structured or semi-structured personal interactions that challenge teachers' thinking, (4) analyzing epistemological and ideological assumptions in documents, and (5) engaging in reflective writing.

**Studying Ideology and Epistemology as Concepts**

The first day of class in fall 2001, to find out the extent to which teachers were familiar with the concept of ideology, I asked them to write how they would describe the ideology of curriculum they recently taught. Fourteen of the seventeen responded. Three had no idea and wrote statements such as “I’m not sure what I’m being asked.” Eight briefly named a core
belief that informs their teaching (e.g., constructivism, child-centered learning, multiculturalism) or that informs the dominant curriculum (e.g., English-speaking). While the other three did not actually define ideology, they used the concept correctly, two by critiquing the ideology of California's standards. For example, one of them answered,

Since we are asked to teach the CA state curriculum standards, of which there are many, requiring the majority of instructional time, I’d say the ideology of my curriculum conforms largely to conventional academic knowledge, with individual attempts on my part to introduce a differing perspective. (September 7, 2001)

As their responses suggested, most had not encountered the term ideology in relationship to their own work and weren’t sure what it meant. However, most were able to identify values and theories they preferred, although they wrote little about why they preferred some theories more than others.

Reading about ideology and epistemology offers teachers a language that can help in their own self-reflection. In another course I taught in the same program, teachers studied how four epistemological perspectives formulate what counts as knowledge, and how truth claims are judged. The perspectives are positivism, phenomenology, narrative research, and emancipatory research. Teachers analyzed articles that embody each perspective in order to figure out assumptions authors make about the nature of knowledge and truth.

In Multicultural Curriculum Design, teachers analyzed several definitions of ideology, and several short passages in which the concept was used. Then they spent about an hour collectively constructing the following definition as they wrestled with the concept:

[Ideology is the] formation of a way of looking at the world based on what you have seen, experienced. It’s what you were taught. You may or may not be aware of it. It’s a window that frames your view of everything. Was formed in your past, is being formed on an ongoing basis. Gives you a way to simplify, interpret what you see and experience. You justify what you do or think with your ideology. What a group holds as truth. (September 7, 2001)

This definition packs a lot of ideas together. While reading about and defining ideology and epistemology do not necessarily prompt teachers to reflect on their own assumptions, doing so provides language that serves as a useful conceptual tool for other reflective work.
Figure 2.1. Ground Rules for Discussion

1. Keep in mind that differences in perspective are not the problem; the problem is our great difficulty talking across those differences. Also keep in mind that consensus may not be the goal of discussion. Rather, the main goal may be understanding other points of view. In other words, you should seek understanding, not necessarily agreement.

2. It is okay, and often helpful, to speak from your own personal experience. At the same time, recognize that you can't make generalizations from your experience. Your experience is true for you; it may or may not be true for other people.

3. When listening to someone speak from her or his experience, listen and do not deny the validity of that experience. You can ask questions for clarification. But watch for conversation stoppers, such as “Yes, but...” “You must have been misinterpreting what happened,” and “You shouldn’t feel like that.”

4. Don’t interrupt. Wait for the other person to finish, and make sure you actually heard and followed what the other person was saying before jumping in with what you have to say.

5. If you aren’t sure you understood what the other person was saying, try paraphrasing what you heard back to the person, and ask if that is what he or she said or meant. Don’t simply dismiss or ignore what the other person said.

6. Express disagreement with someone else in a way that acknowledges and respects the point of view that person has articulated. For example, you might say, “I think I see what you are saying. I see the issue differently, though, and here is why.”

7. If you feel attacked or threatened by what another person is saying, it’s okay to express your feelings, but own them. You can say, “I am feeling XYZ about what you just said,” but do not attack the other person with statements like “You are being really biased!” You might also take a short time-out before saying anything.

8. You don’t have to disclose anything you do not wish to disclose. If you are feeling threatened or uneasy and would rather keep your thoughts private, you have a right to do so. Recognize, however, that if all of us never disclosed anything controversial, there would be even less understanding of differences than there is now.

diverge. Dialog poems structure personal narrative writing, offering a way of engaging with "otherness out loud," as SooHoo (2004b) put it. "Composing a narrative facilitates an awakening of consciousness. Deeper, penetrating meaning comes from listening to other narratives" (p. 266). Using this activity, teachers have explored conflicting viewpoints about issues such as gay rights, war, isolation of elderly people, isolation of immigrants, monolingualism, discrimination against people with disabilities, ethnicity, and age differences.

Document Analysis

Document analysis is a strategy that helps teachers identify epistemological and ideological assumptions in materials and resources they use. I have teachers work in small groups and analyze specific documents (such as curriculum guides) or Web sites (such as state department of education Web sites). For analyzing these they use questions such as those in Figure 2.2. (In Chapter 5, we briefly examine textbook analysis, which is a related form of document analysis.)

Reflective Writing

Finally, throughout the semester, I structure reflective writings. During one section of Multicultural Curriculum Design, teachers wrote reflections about various teaching dilemmas they had experienced. Then, on the basis of those reflections, they identified some core beliefs and assumptions underlying their thinking. An example of a writing prompt appears in Figure 2.3: Teachers are asked to reflect on how they handled a specific example of curriculum they were told to teach, which they may have questioned from a multicultural perspective. Other dilemmas teachers wrote about included how they handled a political conflict they had experienced when teaching, a conflict between themselves and students over a specific principle or value, and a conflict between preparing students for tests and teaching to students' interests. I emphasized that I was interested in the reasoning underlying their decisions, much more than the decisions themselves.

A prominent theme that emerged in these reflective writings was teacher agency. The international teachers and many of the U.S. teach-

Figure 2.2. Questions to Guide Analysis of Curriculum Documents for Ideology

1. Who produced this document, resource, or Web site (if it is possible to tell)? Can you tell where the authors or producers are coming from?

2. How is this document, resource, or Web site intended to be used? By whom?

3. What is it trying to accomplish? What is its purpose?

4. What key concepts does it use? What problems, issues, and points of view does it directly address? What does it directly address from the world view? Whose view does it tend to support? Whose view does it undermine or ignore?

5. How would you describe the ideology of this document, resource, or Web site?

6. Whose knowledge isn’t here, that could be here? What is left out?
My grade school years in Los Angeles, during the sixties, were in classrooms with predominantly other African American students, and were taught by many African American teachers and culturally sensitive young White teachers. I recollect the majority of the African American teachers were very strict yet caring. . . . [At the college I attended] most of the students of color were recruited from Los Angeles. We felt ostracized and alienated. Even though I was the valedictorian of my high school class and accepted into X College “With Honors at Entrance,” I was treated like an upward bound or affirmative action student. . . . Subsequently, the humiliation and overwhelming dominant ideology . . . forced me to take a leave of absence after three and half years of instruction. I did not return to complete my undergraduate instruction until some 25 years later. (November 24, 2003)

As a result, she is committed to preparing African American high school students for college entrance and success in college. In another example, a Mexican American elementary teacher wrote:

I have a 3½-year-old daughter who is questioning who she is and where she fits into this world. I never thought I would have to answer such difficult questions this early on in her development. About a month ago we were spending time singing songs together and reading various books. I have always shared various literatures of different cultures since she was a baby. While in the middle of one of her favorite songs, “Jesus Loves the Little Children,” there comes a part where you sing, “Red and yellow, black and white,” which represents the races of our world. She immediately stopped and turned to me and asked, “Mommy, why am I not in the song?” I replied with “What do you mean?” She said, “They don’t say brown, I’m not in it.” (November 23, 2003)

Experiences like this made her determined to create curriculum in which students can see themselves.

The White teachers’ writings generally did not address how race informed their beliefs about multicultural curriculum, although several described other formative experiences that placed them in “outsider” roles. For example, Christi, who is featured in Chapters 3 and 4, described being embarrassed about her hippie parents when she was growing up, which sensitized her to other people who might be embarrassed by home. Kathy, featured in Chapter 6, described growing up as a Quaker and feeling like an outsider around non-Quaker peers. She valued her Quaker roots, but
had to learn to deal with other people's persistent ignorance about her religion.

Most teachers showed growth in their ability to ask hard questions of themselves. Reflecting on the article "Planting Seeds of Solidarity" (Peterson, 2000/01), a White teacher perceptively realized that her previous attempts to make curricula multicultural were more limited than she had realized:

Maybe the reason I have felt a sense of freedom in my classroom to pick and choose what I want to teach outside the state-mandated curriculum is because maybe I have never chosen to teach anything meaningful, anything deep, anything socially sensitive that might make the kids want to be part of a solution, to want to change things, to question why or why not. Maybe I have never dared tackle issues such as poverty, racial injustice, social stratification, all kinds of inequities. (November 23, 2003)

FROM SELF-EXAMINATION TO ACTION

Developing epistemological and ideological clarity means identifying the basis on which one makes classroom decisions, where that basis comes from, and whom it serves most strongly. The hardest part is uncovering taken-for-granted assumptions. Kumashiro (2004) argued that what we take as common sense often is, in fact, oppressive, partly because of the degree to which it is taken for granted. Believing that we cannot work against the grain is one of those assumptions. He noted two reasons why it is difficult to uncover and challenge common sense practices in teaching. The first reason is that we often feel pressure to conform. The second reason is that commonsensical ideas often give us some sense of comfort, if only because they are so familiar that they don’t require rethinking (p. xxiii).

Examining the basis of one’s thinking does not necessarily mean that one comes to embrace perspectives that run counter to one’s own, to see truth as relative, or to see knowledge that is most worth teaching and learning as fluid. A teacher might decide, for example, that students will be best served by learning traditional disciplinary content well, rather than learning adapted or transformed versions of that content. A teacher might decide that some truths are fixed and unchanging, and that questioning truth leads to unfounded relativism. In one study, for example, Powell (1996) compared two teachers in order to examine the relationship between a teacher’s epistemology and her or his approach to multicultural curricu-

lum. One of the teachers held a developmentalist approach, seeing students’ needs and interests as the basis for curriculum design. This teacher was receptive to replacing some traditional content with content from ethnic studies because she did not bring a fixed idea about what is most worth teaching. Further, she saw students’ interests as a legitimate part of curriculum. The other teacher saw curriculum in terms of the structure of his discipline (science), in relationship to which he judged what is relevant to learn and teach. He also judged students’ learning abilities in relationship to their mastery of disciplinary content. He could not see the relevance of content that is not already an established part of science, and so he saw multicultural curriculum as fairly irrelevant.

I approach multicultural curriculum design from the vantage point of my own ideological perspective and epistemological assumptions; these underlie this book and my teaching. However, I value questioning and examining a broad range of ideas from a broad range of perspectives. Doing so ultimately supports critical thinking, dialog, and honest engagement with differences.

The remainder of this book examines various elements of curriculum design and illustrates how teachers have worked with and used these elements in their own classrooms. Working with all of the elements—ranging from identifying what is most worth teaching to thinking through how to assess learning, to figuring out how to connect students’ experiences with academic ideas—requires making judgments. While this chapter has offered tools and conceptual frameworks for analyzing how one makes judgments, the process of self-analysis is continual. The next chapter examines building curriculum around central ideas that are judged to be most worth learning, or of enduring understanding. While curriculum standards and textbooks give teachers information and concepts to work with, they do not usually identify central concepts worth teaching in specific classroom contexts. How a teacher thinks this question through is a matter of epistemology and ideology.

NOTES

1. It is possible that an impetus of the standards movement was a reaction against educators using personal opinion and experience as a basis for planning curriculum, since the standards movement reasserts the authority of disciplinary experts to determine curriculum. However, it appears that teachers experience this shift to reassert absolutist thinking, rather than helping move them toward reflective thinking.
2. As noted in Chapter 1, this is a national network of several colleges and universities, organized through Georgetown University. On my campus, about eight faculty members participated over several years.

3. I am always somewhat suspicious of stage theories, since they often reflect value judgments that a group of people make regarding what they take to be inferior development of other people. Stage theories also embody a linear conception of growth that does not necessarily reflect human growth patterns. However, distinguishing among levels of competence can serve as a helpful device for communicating what novice performance "looks like" in comparison to more expert performance. As such, it can serve as a useful heuristic device for discussion and self-analysis.

4. **Positivism** is a way of understanding the world that assumes reality exists apart from the knower and can be known through careful processes of data collection. Positivist research attempts to discern patterns in human behavior, and interventions that affect human behavior. **Phenomenology** is a way of understanding that assumes reality cannot be known apart from the knower, and that knowing is always in context. Phenomenological research consists of the disciplined attempt of a researcher to uncover patterns in the meaning making of others and to illuminate human activity rather than discovering generalizable patterns or laws of social activity. **Narrative** assumes that the most unmediated, holistic forms of knowledge are narrated by individuals based on their own experience without interpretation of a researcher or mediator. Through storytelling, people can connect and interpret events in a way that is meaningful to the narrator. Storytelling also acts as a testimony that certain things did happen, regardless of whether those experiences have been verified through other ways of knowing. **Emancipatory knowledge** serves a community's desire to confront relations of oppression, gain self-determination, and uplift the community. It locates knowledge within the social history of knowers and their communities; emancipatory knowledge comes from and is owned by the community using it for its own purposes.

5. Teachers, possibly with their students, should tailor to students' age and maturity level ground rules for discussing controversial issues in their own classrooms.