Action research is a powerful way for us as teachers to improve our own practice. But when we try to address a problem, most often we start by looking at methods. We ask questions like "Does cooperative learning help my students learn X?" or "What kind of talk do my students use in cooperative groups as they learn X?" Sometimes the question focuses on specific groups of learners: "How do my female biology students engage in problem solving?" or "What revision strategies work best for my African American writers?" The trouble with these questions is that they make the teacher invisible, a sort of gender-free, culture-free technician, a person-of-no-color.

Perhaps the question behind the question should be more personal: "How can I, Jane Zeni, as a bookish White female, learn the perspective of Bob, who is African American, male, and producing nothing in my class?" When I work as consultant with action researchers, I watch them struggle to put themselves into the question, to see their own identities as problematic. Geertz (1988) de­plores "the pretense" by some researchers that they are capable "of looking at the world directly, as though through a one-way screen, seeing others as they really are" (p. 141). Action researchers cannot observe a scene without affecting whoever is there. And a teacher's race, class, gender, age, and temperament are far from invisible to students.

When we, as teacher-researchers, do not locate ourselves and our own cultures in the research we do, our fieldnotes may simply reveal the old stereotypes. This is especially true when we describe students from groups that historically have been less successful in the school system. Teacher-researchers may see children of color as "at risk" or "learning disabled," suffering from "low self-
esteem" or "family problems" or "lack of motivation." Would an observer closer to the student's culture see the same picture?

WHO IS CULTURALLY INVISIBLE?

I would like to suggest that cultural invisibility—our students' and our own—is a key ethical problem in doing action research. The two vignettes that follow were written by teachers who took a closer look, then consciously changed their instinctive response to students whose cultures differed from their own.

A decade ago, in the St. Louis suburb of Webster Groves, secondary teachers Joan Krater, Nancy Cason, and Minnie Phillips helped launch a research team. Initially, they saw their goal as finding more effective ways to improve the writing of their African American male students in this majority White (75%) district. A key text in changing their perspective was this passage from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952):

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bones, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodyless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (p. 3)

Ellison's words suggested the title eventually chosen for the team's action research book, *Mirror Images: Teaching Writing in Black and White* (Krater et al., 1994). White teachers on the team realized that "when we looked at Black male students in our classrooms, what we saw at first was a reflection of our own assumptions, fears, and frustrations—a long with the masks the kids themselves put up for protection" (p. 43). As the team's university member, I saw the goal reconceptualized through 5 years of monthly meetings, fieldnotes, essays, and collaborative reports. Instead of "fixing" students' deficiencies, the teachers began to talk of creating classrooms where Black as well as White students would feel culturally welcome. As they learned to see "other people's children" more clearly (Delpit, 1995), most of those children learned to improve their writing.

Seeing "Other People's Children" 1

In this vignette from *Mirror Images*, Nancy Cason describes a confrontation with a seventh grader and how she saw past the mask:
I told Wilson to remove his hat in the classroom. He took a defensive and rebellious attitude, I tensed up—and we had a stand-off. For at least two weeks, there was no work from Wilson. He sat in class scowling.

Thankfully this happened early in the year, for I had time to undo the damage. After class one day I spoke to Wilson. I apologized for being curt and abrupt with him, adding that I wouldn’t expect him to talk to me the way I had talked to him. I dropped that authoritative “teacher” role and approached him on a person-to-person level.

Wilson listened without saying anything, then smiled tentatively. I had offered friendship, and he had accepted. The next day he entered class and took out paper and pen with me air of a dedicated student. From that day he became my champion, scolding others who were talking or not on task.

As the holidays approached, my teammate and I took a group of students to *A Christmas Carol*. My teammate did not want to take Wilson because the scowling, nasty attitude that I had seen from him was ever present in her class. I assumed responsibility for the decision and he went. He enjoyed the play tremendously. He hushed the talking students, held doors open for “little old ladies,” and smiled the entire day. The other teacher’s faith began to build and Wilson’s attitude changed in her class, too.

Across the board, in all four core classes that quarter, we saw more improvement in grades from Wilson than from any of the other one hundred students on team.

Wilson and I had a second confrontation later in the year. He had headphones and a cassette player on as he entered class. I smiled (very important) reassuringly, held my hand out, and requested he give them to me to be returned after school. For a moment, Wilson assumed the same defensive body language and demeanor that he showed in the beginning of the year. His gut reaction was defiance. Suddenly, he returned my smile, his body relaxed, and he handed the prize over to me. *(Mirror Images, p. 168)*

Nancy catches herself in an attitude that will only play into the stereotypical interaction of White female teacher with Black male student. She takes the risk of showing her humanness and inviting the same from Wilson. Most important, she reflects on their relationship, recognizing her power to change the mode of cross-cultural communication.

**Seeing "Other People's Children" 2**

The ethical imperative to see culture in our classroom relationships is, of course, not limited to White teachers. Myrtho Prophete gathered and led a multiyear action research team in her elementary school in the affluent suburb of Rockwood, Missouri. All her teammates (like the great majority of their students) were White, and most Black students were bused from St Louis. Myrtho, who is African American, describes a confrontation with a White student who challenged her...
As I was passing out information about the life of Martin Luther King Jr., I observed a sour look from one of my fifth graders. Then he crumpled up the sheet before I could distribute the rest of the papers. Anger boiling at the back of my throat, I decided to ignore the behavior. I had daily conflicts with Johnny and wanted to avoid another.

Johnny whined, "What do we have to learn about him for?"

I knew the retort I was thinking was bound to come leaping out of my mouth. I wanted to ask him to leave the room. (I felt insulted; how dare he question the importance of Dr. King?) After all, this was the first African-American topic I had taught since the new year of 1996. It wasn't as if I had started the daily diet of Black History Month curriculum. I wanted to say, "How do you think we (meaning African Americans) feel living in a White society daily?"

I decided to explain why I was upset. Maybe Johnny was just parroting ideas he had heard elsewhere. Why was I assuming he was personally insulting me? (Well, he did have a demeaning tone!)

I said I was upset because my feelings were hurt. (This was the first time I shared such feelings with my class.) I said I felt hurt because I am Black and he was rejecting a Black person. "Yeah!" chimed in several other students. Some looked relieved that they had found a way to express that they did not share his attitude. As an African American teacher in a district with an 85% White enrollment, I welcomed their support.

As calmly as I could, I began to explain that we had studied many historic Americans at school. "For Social Studies projects you had your choice to study Amelia Earhart, Theodore Roosevelt, Annie Oakley, Benjamin Franklin, or some other person. Dr. King is an American, too. His birthday is a national holiday. He made significant contributions to our country. That is why we study his life."

"Oh," said Johnny in an effort to change the subject. "I didn't know we could do Theodore Roosevelt."

Later, I shared the incident with my colleagues at our action research seminar. Sponsored by the Gateway Writing Project, we were a racially diverse group of teachers from many districts. That day we were discussing "Factors that Hinder the Education of Black Children in Predominantly White Schools" (1990) by local African American teacher William Jenkins. I remarked that my problem was with a White child. When I told my story, one of our consultants, Jane Zeni, commented that European American students often shut down when confronted with the history of slavery and racism:

"Many kids today don't know that Black and White students worked together in the 1960s fighting for Civil Rights. Today they see it as a 'Black thing.'" Jane cited Joel Spring's (1995, pp. 90-91) discussion of "White Guilt."

We concluded that it may be difficult to avoid a sense of overpowering guilt by association. I wondered, "Do my students know and identify with White people who helped in the Civil Rights struggle? Maybe if they did, they wouldn't be so resistent to hearing the facts."

So I brought such stories into my classroom. I pointed out White clergy in marches, the trio of Civil Rights workers (two White, one Black) killed in Missis-
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sippi, a White man brutally beaten for participating in the freedom rides, and others in the struggle

Next, I selected *Days of Courage The Little Rock Story* by Richard Kelso for literature study by the entire class. This book was an excellent choice because it keeps to the facts. All the words in quotations are the actual words spoken by the participants. Kelso describes some White people as segregationist, others as integrationist. Their actions, detailed from the first day, range from the kind White girl inviting a Black girl to lunch to the angry mob outside protesting the integration of Central High School.

Journal writing gave my students a daily opportunity to express their feelings and reactions to the novel:

"It was sad when the mob was trying to beat up the newscasters."

"I drought it was a bad idea that they wanted to hang somebody."

"I'm glad that some of the White children were nice to the nine children."

"I can't believe some of the police officers threw down their badges and joined the mob."

These dialogue journals, and my own responses, were a great asset to my understanding.

I also showed a video, *America's Civil Rights Movement* (1989), from the Teaching Tolerance Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. This film led to a fabulous discussion. Astra Cherry, another teacher-consultant, had modeled a Socratic seminar for our group. Using the Socratic method (Lettis, 1994), I posed open-ended questions and allowed the students to talk, basing their responses on facts from the documentary. My role was facilitator. I tried to stay nonjudgmental and let students come to their own conclusions.

A few weeks later, during an interdisciplinary project that included an African American research paper, I shared some pictures of African Americans with the students to color. Johnny chose a picture of Thurgood Marshall. He didn't scribble over it as I feared. Instead, he colored it carefully. He stepped up to my desk to whisper, "Shouldn't the cloak be black? It says he was a judge." I sensed he wanted to do an excellent job.

My action research did not turn Johnny into a model student. He continued to challenge me on many occasions. But the strategies seemed to give him some new insight, and the experience gave me some insight into him. My students needed a vehicle to express their thoughts—through the dialogue journal, the video, me, Socratic seminar, and literature that helped them identify with historical events that are still relevant today. I think these strategies can help children learn tolerance and develop respect for issues from more than just the obvious opposing perspectives.

Finally, the action research was a tremendous lesson for me. I found out what was on my students' minds. This experience was a strong reminder that student input is crucial to learning. Students have valuable things to say. I need to listen and learn (Prophete, 1996, rev 1999).

Myrtho, like Nancy, was determined to look beyond her ingrained cultural reactions and assumptions to see what might be going on inside a "difficult"
kid. I believe this willingness to listen and learn, to study our students, is an ethical principle for doing action research in culturally diverse classrooms.

Of course, all classrooms are "culturally diverse" if the notion of culture is not reduced to race. Even in an apparently homogeneous classroom, the teacher will differ from students in many dimensions of culture, such as gender, social class, religion, and certainly age.

"SECOND-SIGHT"

I believe that any teacher-researcher who is committed to listen, observe, and document life in me classroom must work to become at least somewhat fluent in other cultures. The insights of four African American scholars suggest ways we can learn to cross over, to take on another perspective.

In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois described Black people as "gifted with second-sight in this American world," meaning that they are raised in the African American culture but also exposed to and shaped by the dominant White culture. The result is "this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (1903/1982, p. 45). DuBois emphasizes the pain of this position—but he also calls it a "gift."

Feminist theory suggests another kind of second-sight. According to Patricia Hill Collins (1991), women see the world, and themselves, from two perspectives—through the dominant male culture as well as through their own female experience. Can the concept of second-sight be applied to practitioner research?

James Banks (1998) proposes a "typology of crosscultural researchers" with four categories based on the ways people in a pluralistic society are socialized (p. 7). Of particular interest in this discussion are Banks's two middle categories. The "indigenous-outsider" has grown up within a marginalized community but assimilated into the dominant culture; the "external-insider" was socialized in the dominant culture but became an "adopted" member of another community (p. 8).

Anthropologist Janice Hale-Benson (1986) suggests that people who have learned to live in two worlds can play some powerful educational roles. According to her categories, "cultural translators" are minority group members "who have been successful at dual socialization. They share their own experiences in negotiaung the intricacies of me majority culture and convey ways to meet me society's demands without compromising ethnic values." "Cultural mediators" are people "from mainstream culture who can serve as guides for minority persons"—including teachers and counselors, but also informal mentors (p. 190).

When I read DuBois, Collins, Banks, and Hale-Benson, I think of the "second-sight" that we as teacher-researchers need if we hope to understand any of
our students and to reflect on our own roles in the community inside and outside the school. Gradually, we can stretch the boundaries of our own socialization enough to see our students in a more authentic way.

OUR STUDENTS, OURSELVES

If action research is to be ethical, if we are to avoid projecting our own biases on the students we study, we must also observe ourselves and the culture we bring to the classroom. A few years into the project, the Webster Groves team began to write cultural self-portraits. These autobiographical pieces, which appear between the chapters in *Mirror Images* (Krater et al., 1994), proved essential to the team's research. Two examples follow.

Seeing My Own Culture 1

Minnie Phillips teaches basic and college prep classes at Webster Groves High School. Like Myrtho, she is an African American working in a majority White school. But Minnie's research led her to examine her relationships with her Black students. When she wrote about her own childhood for *Mirror Images*, she discovered a theme of cultural "repression."

Minnie had grown up in a small, segregated town where poetry recitals, dramatic performances, and skills in oral expression were features of African American life:

Language facility meant adeptness in speech and rhetoric—at emotional persuasion and comic jabs (playing the dozens, quick rejoinders, and embellished folktales)—homespun entertainment which offset the "Jim Crow" humiliation and subjugation imposed by the world outside. (From *Mirror Images*, p. 9)

At 16, Minnie left her rural home to enter the University of Missouri. There she immersed herself in the artifacts of European American culture. "I resolved to alter my dialect (a kind of self-taught Eliza Doolittle)," she wrote, "and since I was minoring in speech and drama, stage speech seemed properly elevated." After college, she began teaching in a newly integrated school where Black students were second-class citizens:

Running away from my culture, I had run into it, but this time I had to choose, I thought, between students or me institution. I was, after all, hired to teach standard English, I insisted to myself, and I set about ferreting out "nonstandard English" with a passion (although I'm horrified to think of the bodies I left behind...). I included a few Black writers and social activists in the curriculum but with such traditional standards that Black students often stared in amazement to see if I was
"for real." Less charitable ones dismissed me as "Oreo"—Black on the outside, White on the inside. What they didn't know was not only was I Black, but my overgrown cultural roots still lay in the cotton fields. I had the scars to prove it. I didn't want to be White. I wanted them to be educated. I had just come to think that the "White way" was the only way to the prosperity they coveted. (From *Mirror Images*, pp. 8-9)

Through her years of action research, Minnie began to reach more of her Black students by drawing on the African American culture they shared—hers rural, theirs urban:

I realized the extent to which I had denied my own cultural background when I began to connect with Black students and my own children as listener, advisor, and interested reader of their writing. The writing project helped me make those connections systematic. I try especially to interweave examples from my personal background into the lessons and works we study, and invite students to share their examples. ... It's important that we feel connected, freeing ourselves to learn from our cultural pasts as well as each other. (Adapted from *Mirror Images*, p. 9)

By acknowledging her own roots, Minnie showed her students that they could connect with majority culture without losing their own. She sees herself as a cultural translator for her Black students and a cultural mediator for her White students.

**Seeing My Own Culture 2**

As a consultant and member of the Webster Groves team, I too wrote my cultural profile for *Mirror Images*. Through writing, I discovered a thread running through my story. It is a theme I call "cultural adoption," my willingness to adopt—or be adopted by—people who differed from me. Despite the naive "we're really all the same under the skin" attitude of my early years of teaching, I had repeatedly sought out cultural diversity.

My formal education began at a parochial school where I was a loner, immersed in classical music and incompetent at jump rope. Then, entering the 1960s and public high school, I found a peer group where I belonged—girls who scorned makeup and the top forty in favor of poetry, politics, and folk music. Nearly all of my crowd was Jewish. At Teaneck High, if you were Black or Catholic, you got married after graduation; if you were Jewish, you went to college. I suppose school showed me the difference between ancestry and culture. Ancestry is a given, but culture can be adopted.

College was a heady time of idealism, crisis, and assassination. I moved on the fringes of the civil rights and antiwar movements. I'd march, carrying candles and singing "We shall overcome," but I wasn't about to occupy buildings or get thrown
in jail. During the next ten years, I taught Black and White students at a Philadelphia alternative school, then Pueblo, Hispanic, and Anglo students in New Mexico. My sons were adopted as babies in Santa Fe. Though my husband and I had talked of choosing an interracial family, the growing racial polarization of the 1970s made us hesitant. After much soul-searching, and with more bravado than confidence, we filled out the adoption forms stating "no preference" under "race or ethnic group." Adam Pablo is Hispanic; Mark Hosteen is Navajo and African. Going for adoption—regardless of what "people" might say—was the best crazy decision I've ever made.

Today both my sons have developed a multicultural identity. They learned African American communication style with neighborhood kids, codeshift fluently, and date across racial lines. Adam joined a Black fraternity and now prefers his middle name, Pablo. Perhaps it is my own cultural past—my tentative belonging in Catholic, Jewish, and Anglo circles—that tells me it's OK. I've learned that integration is no magic solution to racism and that White people can't drop out because we're all in this together. (Adapted from Mirror Images, pp. 290-293)

This writing brought me unexpected insight into a problem in my practice as a university teacher. In English Methods, I often encounter resistance from preservice teachers to topics of diversity. Like me, most of my students are White, but their response baffled and troubled me. When Myrtho shared her dilemma, I immediately thought of "White Guilt" because I was reading Spring's book in an attempt to make sense of my own situation.

Could Myrtho's fifth grader be expressing more blatantly what was really going on with my college seniors and graduate students? I suspect that many preservice teachers tacitly believe:

1. "I don't really have a culture."
2. "I don't have any prejudices."
3. "When I teach, I will treat all my students equally."

My responsibility is to help them grow beyond this stage of taking their own cultural neutrality for granted—to help them problematize their own cultures before they begin teaching.

Perhaps my own cultural past as a college student of the 1960s in Boston had left me prejudiced against my midwestern students, most of them born after the major struggles for civil rights. When they yawned at my enthusiasm for multicultural curricula, I bristled. As I realized that I could be a cultural translator instead of a judge, I decided to take action with an assignment that has become a mainstay of my course.

For several weeks, my students begin class with 15 minutes to free write their own cultural profile in nine dimensions: gender, race, age, region, religion, ethnic heritage, education, class, and family. I guide them through each dimen-
sion with questions to recreate in their memories the experiences that taught them what it meant to be, for example, male or female. Finally, they reflect on the "dimensions" log to write an essay, "The Culture I Bring to the Classroom." Imaginatively re-seeing their own past prepares them to see more clearly what happens in the classrooms where they observe and teach.

For years I had exhorted future teachers to value cultural diversity, but failed to suggest that they start by studying their own cultures. The "dimensions of culture" lesson has helped me appreciate the diversity (in age, religion, family, ethnicity, and so forth) that actually exists among my White midwestern students. And as they recognize and share the richness of their own stories, they find it easier to connect with different stories. In the process, I hope they will replace a legalistic ethic of fairness ("treating all my students equally") with a more relational ethic of commitment, authenticity, and awareness of self and others.

**BECOMING VISIBLE**

Minnie Phillips explains how action research and attention to cross-cultural communication help her connect with her students:

> Education is fundamentally a personal experience. In the classroom, we teach along with content who we are and what we believe. Similarly, our students bring to the classroom their views of the world as well as their perceptions of relatedness to others. "Reading" the world through the eyes of student writers, hearing voices through the words of writers we teach, and incorporating a variety of teaching approaches compel not only an openness to cultural differences but to learning itself. (Phillips memo, 1999)

As teacher-researchers, we must beware the mask of cultural invisibility. Instead, we can choose to let ourselves be seen, to include the dimensions of our own cultures in our classroom data, and to let our relationships with students challenge our cultural assumptions. In this way, we reduce the ethical risk of presuming to give voice to others while we are merely rewriting our own worlds.

As I read published research, I often want to ask the author, "Who are you? Who is writing this story? What experiences have forged your research tools (two eyes and one brain)? What communities have taught you how to see the world?"

Perhaps one mark of ethically responsible action research is that our readers will know something of who we are.

**NOTE**

1. References to all adults and institutions in this chapter use real names to recognize their contributions to our thinking. Names of children were changed to protect their privacy.