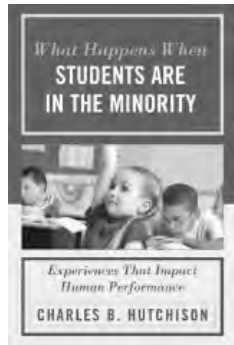


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<b>What Happens When Students are in the Minority: Experiences That Impact Human Performance</b>		
<b>Author:</b>	Charles Hutchinson (2009)	
<b>Publisher:</b>	Rowman & Littlefield Education	
<b>Pages</b>	<b>ISBN</b>	<b>Price</b>
242 pages	978-1607093954	\$32.95 USD



In *What Happens When Students are in the Minority: Experiences That Impact Human Performance*, Dr. Charles Hutchinson uses narratives to examine the implications and critical need for culturally responsive teaching. Hutchinson, a former scientist and classroom teacher of twelve years, is an education professor at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He has authored several books and other works dealing with issues that arise in the diverse classroom, within local and global contexts. Hutchinson’s various experiences living and working abroad add legitimacy to his works and to the thesis of this book: to provide insight on how to mitigate the often damaging effects of being the minority.

The book is a 252-page collection of actual accounts that explore the experiences and implications of being the minority. The stories are told from educators assigned the task of “experiencing the minority”, where they assume a minority role in an unfamiliar situation. The purpose of the exercise was to illuminate challenges minority students face in the classroom, and the book was designed to illustrate this phenomenon. The author contends that the response to having minority status is typically negative, but varies based primarily on one’s level of familiarity with the situation. Hutchinson describes these resultant behavior(s) as the *minority effect* or, a “raw, human experience...a quest for comfort, acceptance, or invisibility”, which involves various coping strategies (p. 230). The book’s five parts examine the minority experience through the lens of various social groups and situations; namely, those dealing with race, culture, and gender.

Part I provides context for the investigation and discusses emergent patterns of behavior resulting from various situational minority experiences. Part II explores the perspectives of racial minority educators, who notably appear more adaptable to being the “the other”. In Part III, the task is explained from the view of those in the racial majority, who traditionally hold the *majority prerogative* to (dis)engage in minority experiences (pp. 9-11). When juxtaposed, these sections allow for an interesting analysis; the racial majority tends to find the experience more difficult, whereas the task is somewhat less daunting for the minority educators. Part IV continues the discussion and summarizes key points and themes. While Part V offers a final synthesis of the foregoing narratives and provides a series of affirmations to frame the minority experience. The book concludes with recommendations on how to recognize and mitigate negative implications of the *minority effect*. The solutions point to the fact that a culturally relevant atmosphere supports one’s ability to naturally adapt to otherwise unfamiliar and threatening situations. The author suggests that cultural relevance enhances student performance and, importantly, that it underscores the vitality of the student-teacher relationship itself.

One common thread in the essays was how increased familiarity of “the other” diminished feelings of anxiety and awkwardness, which responds to the author’s somewhat rhetorical question: “Are the comforted in a relatively better mental condition to perform better in school and at work?” (p. 219). As Hutchison himself notes, the extent to which one is affected by the minority experience is contingent on their level of previous exposure and the confidence gained through their interactions. The author offers that, given the opportunity to become more familiar with different cultural groups, etc., fear gives way to understanding. Ann Wright, for example, concluded that the nominal comfort she felt attending a racially different church was due to her previous exposure to similar religious experiences (p. 186). Other respondents also echoed the notion that prolonged interactions with, or being, the minority increased their level of understanding and comfort. Thus, their awareness of difference was strengthened in a positive way.

This newfound clarity was another theme that emerged from the essays. The teachers acquired a heightened awareness of the issue, even those already considered a minority. Their experiences contextualized disparate qualities of other cultures and elicited empathy, regarding physical and psychological responses associated with minority status. In the case of Jim Cross, for example, the experience of being the (white) minority at a black church initially beckoned a physiological response to his nervousness and he “could not wait to leave” (p.112). Cross later remarked, however, that the experience led to greater sense of empathy for the minority students he taught; how they, too, “feel afraid, self-conscious, and out of place” in racially/culturally unfamiliar situations at school (p.115). This reflective act points to idea that, in the classroom, implications of a culturally unaware teacher are indeed critical. Although, when properly addressed, critical awareness and reflexivity can serve to increase students’ potential to succeed.

Students whose ethnic or cognitive dispositions do not neatly align with those of the dominant culture are often resigned to feelings of alienation and inadequacy. Teachers who do not acknowledge this issue implicitly perpetuate repressive social conditions and stereotypes that

can generate cultural and cognitive dissonance. In the classroom, this dissonance can manifest in various forms of negative behavior, including: disengagement, apathy, outbursts, and being the 'class clown'. The critical response needed to mitigate this debilitating situation is knowledgeable stakeholders who empower students through, not despite, their differences. Teachers must therefore create an inviting classroom environment and deliver lessons with the intent of addressing students based on *who* and *where* they are, both culturally and academically. Furthermore, the teacher should strive to celebrate and include diversity, rather than merely tolerate it. According to Hutchison, a disconnection between students and teacher can render those student helplessly absorbed with the task of reconciling their "otherness", rather than focusing on learning. For most, this preoccupation with acceptance then becomes a catalyst for poor performance. However, occasionally, the *minority effect* compels some to work harder and overcome perceived deficiency and prove themselves, as was the case with Ora Uhuru and Betty Danzi.

When cultural and linguistic relevance is omitted from the classroom, students suffer both academically and psychologically. Some teachers view this outcome as support for the stereotype that minorities are less capable of achieving at high levels. This pejorative view then posits 'difference' as a life-long psychological impediment, ostensibly reinforcing the idea that incongruence with the dominant culture somehow precludes success. In an attempt disassociate from the source of the conflict, it is equally devastating how some students may disengage completely and intentionally choose to *not-learn*. Thus, not only has the student been implicitly forced to internalize deficiency as such, but performance is also hindered. Freire (1970) would offer that *critical consciousness*, which necessarily yields culturally relevant practices, is therefore vital to the educational experience. This speaks to the need for English as Foreign Language (EFL) educators to practice critical reflection in designing and executing linguistic diversity inclusion strategies. In addition, the EFL practitioner should seek to create a pluralistic environment in which everyone learns from each other, and where students *and* teacher collectively engage in academic investigations. The implication is that when teachers resist the view that they are authoritarians, and instead facilitators of equitable dialogue and learning opportunities, all students benefit. Moreover, previously alienated individuals then start the process of restoring the humanity typically denied to them by dominant power structures in society.

Comparably, Delpit and Dowdy (2002) illustrate how race is but one facet of discrimination in schools by examining the links between language and identity, political hierarchy, and cultural conflict. They support their examination using Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which determines the level and speed of second language acquisition. This filter is said to be lowered when we are comfortable with our environment and can make connections with those speaking a different language. The authors suggest, when a student's heritage is labeled sub-standard, they are unable to relate to their teachers. Furthermore, teachers who generally make no attempt to embrace cultural nuances, in effect, strengthen this affective filter and students become more resistant to language acquisition and "eventually reject those who make them feel inferior and unacceptable" (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. 42). Thus, stifling a child's culture prohibits the teacher from truly knowing who they serve and also prevents them from effectively designing a curriculum to meet students' needs.

The essays in the book span racial and cultural boundaries to explore a visceral element of our consciousness, in that feelings of isolation and discomfort are not uncommon in new and unfamiliar situations. This work elucidated the implications of being the minority in the classroom, each narrative highlighting the existence and significance of such occurrences in everyday life. With the Hutchison's guiding analyses, these accounts offer insights to help attenuate the *minority effect*, and how the underlying notion of cultural relevance addresses this issue in an approachable way. Although the situations in the book are specific to the social context of the United States, culturally repressive behaviors of the dominant class are ubiquitous. I would therefore recommend this book not only to the EFL teacher, but any teacher seeking to support the success of culturally and linguistically diverse students. I would also encourage teachers to undertake a similar exercise, with the intent of understanding the worldviews of the population they teach and thus, more effectively engage them.

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