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## The Continuum of Lens through Which Teachers View Cultural Differences: How Perceptions Impact Pedagogy

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## Introduction

The United States is one of the most multiethnic and multicultural societies in the world (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Castro, 2010; Nieto, 2000). The recent increase in diverse student populations enrolled in public schools continues to pose a huge challenge for teachers. Multicultural communities are growing as the number of immigrants increases, encompassing mixed groups of races, cultures, and languages (Dedeoglu & Lamme, 2011; Fry, 2009; Smith, 2009). This shift in demographics has led some public schoolteachers to reevaluate their pedagogies, beliefs, and teaching methods. Moreover, teachers today are responsible for educating children of many races, ethnicities, family compositions, and socioeconomic statuses, and teachers are also responsible for how their own cultural perceptions and instructional styles directly affect the academic progress of all their students (Czop Assaf, Garza, & Battle, 2010; Evans, 2007; Forrest & Alexander, 2004; Gay 2010a; Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Howard, 2006; Merryfield, 2000). Darling-Hammond, Williamson, and Hyler (2007) suggest that to build culturally responsive practice, teachers must possess knowledge about how to examine their cultural assumptions and understand how these assumptions shape their curriculum and instruction. Inquiring about students of culturally diverse backgrounds to make connections between one's teaching and one's students' cultural backgrounds and family values is essential for optimizing students' learning and academic progress (Commins, 2014; Okhremtchouk & González, 2014), as well as the pedagogical language knowledge of the learners (Bunch, 2013; Lucas & Villegas, 2011). Additionally, according to Durden (2008), teachers are the driving force behind creating an educational environment that promotes quality learning through culturally relevant pedagogy, which recognizes, respects, and embraces the diversity of the sociocultural, economic, and linguistic backgrounds of learners and their families.

Texas is one of the states with the largest minority populations to date (Evans, 2007). In today's schools in Texas, the teaching force remains predominantly White and middle class, while the diversity of students, most notably the Hispanic population, continues to rise (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Hill-Jackson, 2007; Kyles & Olafson, 2008; Moule & Higgins, 2007). School systems are often faced with a cultural mismatch between teachers and students that affects teaching and learning (Feistritz, Griffin, & Linnajarvi, 2011; Gay, 2010a; Howard, 2001; Irvine, 2010; Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). Our schools are infused with ethnocentrism (i.e., the strong belief in the superiority of one's own group's cultural heritage, history, values, language, religion, and traditions) in curriculum design and

instructional practices (Sue, 2004). In many instances, the belief in the superiority of one's own group results in an inability to comprehend the perspectives or experiences of individuals from another, different group (Sue, 2004). Therefore, school programs and curriculum often benefit those cultures that are mostly associated with Eurocentric ideas (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008). Unfortunately, this often induces the emergence of teachers' deficit perspectives of learners from nondominant cultures or backgrounds of poverty (Brock, Case, & Taylor, 2013; Commins, 2014; Molle, 2013; Zeichner, 2009) rather than of asset perspectives where learners' cultural identities and languages are infused within school activities and a student-centered curriculum (Bunch, 2013; Cervantes, 2015; Rolón-Dow & Chen, 2014).

For example, differences in communication and language styles can result in misinterpretations of students' ways of interacting or their academic performance (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Commins, 2014; Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Okhremtchouk & González, 2014; Wyatt, 2014). Naturally, teachers will implement the curriculum through their own cultural experiences and teach according to their own belief systems; therefore, there is the likelihood that teachers will have difficulty connecting learning for all students in meaningful and socially equitable ways (Banks, 2006; Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Czop Assaf et al., 2010; Hill-Jackson, 2007; Kyles & Olafson, 2008; Moule & Higgins, 2007; Schmeichel, 2012; Vegh Williams, 2013; Zeichner, 2009). Additionally, when teachers' perceptions or attitudes regarding cultural differences and family values are not challenged, a status quo mentality is propagated within their pedagogy (Brock et al., 2013). In this context, a cultural mismatch results in which teaching and learning are not culturally congruent (Gay, 2010a; Howard, 2001; Irvine, 2010). Teachers need to employ culturally congruent pedagogy by using various instructional styles, interactions, and learning situations that include the students' backgrounds, experiences, languages, and family values (Castro, Field, Bauml, & Morowski, 2012; Commins, 2014; Gay, 2010a; Howard, 2001; Irvine, 2010; Merryfield, 2000; Rolón-Dow & Chen, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to understand how teachers' instructional practices change to meet the needs of a diverse student population in a school district that has experienced a significant demographic shift over the past decade. This study sought to determine teachers' perceptions and practices while meeting the growing needs of a diverse population of students at a middle school with a predominantly Hispanic student population in a large metropolitan city in Southwest Texas.

Culturally relevant pedagogy forms the theoretical framework for this study (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2014; Parhar & Sensoy, 2011).

### **Context of the Study**

The school district's student population in this area of Southwest Texas has experienced a dramatic shift in diversity over the past decade. The middle school in which the study was conducted saw a significant student demographic shift between the 2002–2003 and 2010–2011 school years in that student ethnicity changed as follows: White, 90.1% to 18%; African American, 6.6% to 20.5%; Hispanic, 1.1% to 53.7%; Asian, 1.1% to 1.9%; and two or more races, 0% (not measured) to 3.1%. Additionally, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students increased from 29.4% to 58.8%, as did the percentage of identified limited English proficient (LEP) students, from 4.4% to 12.4%. And in the 2010–2011 school year, 43.9% of students were identified as at-risk of not academically progressing. Since 2011, the demographics have continued to be in flux, and for 2015, the demographics of minority students dominated. What has increased significantly is the percentage of LEP students, now comprising 15.7% of the learner population. Data from this school district indicate that student demographics continue to shift; notably, the LEP student population (comprising mostly Hispanic students) is currently at its highest percentage since 2002. In all schools in which the participants of the study taught, a Hispanic student population predominated.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative research design, specifically life history (Manfra, 2009) with a critical inquiry frame (Atkinson, 1998; Lassonde 2009; Watson & Watson-Franke, 1995), was used to explore and analyze how the perceptions, beliefs, ideologies, experiences, and teaching practices of the participating teachers affected their ability to educate a growingly diverse student population in their school district over the past decade. Life history methodology was used to obtain descriptions of the participants' experiences that exemplified their identities and voices as educators (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Atkinson (1998) posits that critical inquiry provides first-person narratives as conversational guides to bring forth the meaning of the participants' teaching experiences through story. According to Creswell (2012), critical inquiry helps to trigger the emotions of the participants, thus increasing the authenticity of their responses. Additionally, the method of critical ethnographic qualitative research of Carspecken (1996) was instrumental in analyzing information about the participants' life histories—specifically, in identifying participants' self and

identity claims. The study sought to explore the following two questions: What are teachers' perceptions of their pedagogy as they reflect on the growing diversity of the student population? In what ways do the teachers describe culturally responsive teaching in their practice?

### **Participants**

To capture information from teachers who experienced the shift in demographics within a specific suburban middle school, teachers who had 10 or more years of experience within the school district were selected because their history could provide the most substantial contributions to the queries of the study. Four middle school teachers, all White, participated in the study. At the time of the study, Mrs. Cleo was a sixth-grade social studies teacher with 24 years of teaching experience. Mrs. Pearl was a seventh- and eighth-grade science teacher with 17 years of teaching experience, including extensive work with special education students. Mr. Billy was a seventh-grade teacher of Texas history with 20 years of teaching experience. Mrs. Iris was a seventh-grade mathematics teacher with 30 years of teaching experience. She had also taught social studies and science and assisted with students in special education programs within general education settings.

### **Data Sources**

Multiple in-depth interviews with each participating teacher, researcher field notes (including informal classroom observations), and teacher journal reflections served as data sources to provide a thorough, rich description and analysis of the study (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research with a critical inquiry focus assumes that reality is varied and numerous and that it is best understood through the interpretation of people's perceptions and interactions (Yin, 2003). Therefore, the use of interviews, field notes, and teacher journals collected in this study helped capture the varied perceptions and experiences of the participants. Data were collected over the course of one school year. And although all participants were interviewed with the same initial semistructured interview protocol, some questions outside the protocol emerged in subsequent interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed with the constant comparative method to organize information systematically into broad categories (Creswell, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Transcriptions were repeatedly read and reviewed to identify common and divergent themes, and to verify or disprove emerging themes

by using examples from the data. These multiple, repeated readings provided varied perspectives in analyzing the texts and were helpful in revealing themes (Stake, 1995). Throughout data analysis, it was necessary to revisit data sources in a cyclical meaning-making process, including the utilization of member checking of interview transcriptions to support validity during data analysis. Peer debriefers, comprising experienced qualitative researchers, were also used as part of a validity process during analysis (i.e., for the coding and identification of themes).

### **Making Meaning of the Data**

During data collection and analysis, the primary goals were to (1) develop a detailed description of each teacher and (2) identify emergent themes. Each of the teachers in this study was interviewed, and all shared their perceptions and instructional strategies regarding how they met the learning needs of a diverse student population as a significant demographic shift was occurring in their schools. In general, the teachers' conscious inclusion of their own cultural identity or unconscious noninclusion of others' cultural identities within their pedagogy and curriculum substantiated existing research (Ladson-Billings, 2009) that teachers' recognition of the ways in which their own individuality is associated with race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status has implications for the ways in which they relate to students and the kinds of instructional approaches they take toward the curriculum. Not surprisingly, the attempt to synthesize and understand teacher interviews and journal data was a complex task. According to Creswell (2012),

Qualitative research is interpretive, which means that the researcher makes interpretations of the data that includes developing a description of an individual or settings, analyzing data for themes or categories, and finally making an interpretation or drawing conclusion about its meaning. (p. 182)

So, to make meaning from the data and frame discussion of the study, two organizers were created: first *teacher profiles* and then a *cultural lens continuum*. The teacher profiles addressed the first and primary goal of data collection and analysis (i.e., teachers' perceptions of their pedagogy within a growingly diverse population of learners), and the cultural lens continuum (i.e., how teachers describe culturally responsive teaching) addressed the second.

The teacher profiles were created to organize the life history data gathered from the interviews and to frame teachers' perceptions of their

teaching experiences. The interview questions provided convenient a priori categories of content to organize uniform discussion of the data sources. The a priori categories also helped frame the sharing of the participating teachers' life history information and their experiential teaching knowledge. These categories outlined discussion across all teacher profiles and included the following: early years, perceptions of diversity, multicultural education awareness, professional development, culturally responsive teaching, and culturally relevant curriculum. In general, the teacher profiles are descriptive in nature and present an overview of the participating teachers' culturally responsive teaching practices. The researchers recognize that reality is based on the participants' perceptions. A person's beliefs and actions are governed by his or her own frame of reference. Therefore, the teacher profiles present the perspectives of the participants and their varied personal experiences (Ponterotto, 2010). Each teacher profile is presented in an abbreviated format that highlights the foundational information of the study.

The teacher profiles served as the basis for additional analysis in which a meaning-making process evolved into sorting data through the metaphor of "lenses" in which participants' worldviews and experiences as well as self and identity claims could be described (Carspecken, 1996). Metaphors are helpful during analysis and often used by qualitative researchers to organize, critically construct, and provide rich meaning to data (Lippi & Cherry, 2011). Metaphors help provide insight for understanding stories of experiences. Therefore, in a cursory analysis of the descriptive teacher profiles, the researchers noted that participants were at various levels of cultural awareness as well as knowledge and skills in working with a diverse student population. To better understand where the participants were with respect to operating as culturally responsive teachers, the researchers created a cultural lens continuum as a metaphorical, heuristic frame for making meaning of the data. The characteristics delineated in this continuum were not meant to specifically gauge or identify where the participants were regarding their cultural responsiveness and competence (as fixed), but rather to serve as a description of their current positions or views of cultural responsiveness with the understanding that these stances, awareness, and skills are continually malleable, most notably during pivotal or transformative pedagogical or relational experiences. The researchers believe that the continuum can serve as a frame for understanding educators' potential movement within and across lenses as they develop cultural awareness and reflect upon culturally responsive pedagogy. It must be noted that the participants shared characteristics of knowledge and awareness in one or more of the

categories of the continuum, and they may have been at different stages at different times.

Through the meaning-making analysis of data within the teacher profiles, the participants' interactions, instructional approaches, and ideological views were described along the cultural lens continuum from *microscopic*, *telescopic*, and *panoramic* to *holographic*. The cultural lens continuum helped to describe the participants' performance within a culturally responsive frame and the degree to which their instructional practices were based on culturally relevant pedagogy where learners' cultural and family background information could be implemented. A discussion of the continuum and its characteristics is provided following the teacher profiles.

## Teacher Profiles

### Mrs. Cleo

At the time of this study, Mrs. Cleo was a social studies teacher with 24 years of teaching experience. She had taught at this middle school for 21 years. She shared that she had "lived in Texas all my life" and was descended "from a family of teachers," including her mother and grandmother, and that "teaching is in my blood." She was raised in an upper middle class family and neighborhood, and throughout most of her schooling, she did not interact or come in contact with students from other cultural groups or anyone who was not White. She further emphasized that there were very few Blacks in her school, but it did have a few Hispanics. "In junior high I saw different cultures, which was an eye opener, and remember being surprised that the Hispanic boys had mustaches."

Although she could not relate any life experiences with others from various backgrounds, she did remember once witnessing a neighboring Hispanic family roasting a pig for a celebration and realizing that other cultures celebrated holidays differently. Nieto (2000) stresses the importance of White teachers identifying their own histories and identities because without this awareness, there will be a propensity to see White culture as normal and other cultures as something other than normal. This appears to be evident in her sharing, "I never thought of having a culture. Maybe that's a little close-minded of me. I just ... grew up thinking everybody lived this way." The personal histories and experiences of teachers help form their educational worldviews, intellectual and educational dispositions, and beliefs about self in relation to others' personal experiences. Individuals' outlooks of reality are socioculturally created and given particular meaning by their life experiences with other



people and their own interpretations of the world (Dedeoglu & Lamme, 2011; Richardson & Villenas, 2000).

Regarding her teaching, Mrs. Cleo was asked about the students from a cultural background different from her own who she felt were most difficult to relate to. She responded, “I guess the Hispanic girls show more attitude than the boys.” She extended her response with, “I don’t know if it’s their culture—the way that they are brought up. The Hispanic girls are ready to fight and will say, ‘My parents said for me to not to take anything.’” Further, Mrs. Cleo shared about her students,

My Asian students tend to be well-behaved and have good grades. It has not always been that way. I’ve had some tougher Asian students, but for the most part if I see the name on the roster the first day of school I think, Oh good! Easy students! And then the Hispanic and Black students—there’s a difference.

She continued with, “And uh ... the Black girls mostly have attitude whether good or bad.”

Interestingly, when discussing her students, Mrs. Cleo often acknowledged the academic skills of her Asian and White students but associated behavioral issues with other minority students. Further, she shared that Asian American students require little to no attention and direction based on their academic excellence. Sometimes, teachers have limited knowledge of other cultures and so misinterpret students’ differences as indications of discipline problems, different behavioral patterns, and lack of motivation or limited cognitive ability (Brock et al., 2013; Castro et al., 2012; Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Cooper, 2013; Czop Assaf et al., 2010; Hill-Jackson, 2007; Howard, 2006; Maye, 2011; Molle, 2013; Paris & Alim, 2014; Saint-Hilare, 2014; Sleeter, 2001; Thomas, 2013; Ullman & Hecsh, 2011; Vegh Williams, 2013; Zeichner, 2009). As a result, teachers are more likely to accept stereotypes in order to rationalize students’ behaviors.

Regarding her pedagogy, Mrs. Cleo shared that she felt that there was a need to increase her understanding of various diverse cultural groups as she encountered more students whose first language was not English. She revealed that she would accommodate those students by pairing them with other Spanish-speaking students who were more fluent in English. She also shared that she would smile or share a joke with them. The inference here is that she was attempting to be relational with students of different cultural backgrounds. She also shared that after the September 11 attacks in 2001, she found it necessary to discuss the religion of Islam with her

students. She said, “It was awkward, and I was having to make a point that there are terrorists and there are the real Muslims.”

Mrs. Cleo felt it was important to understand the cultural backgrounds of her students and that she therefore ought to participate in additional professional training to help her hone the effectiveness of her pedagogy. She felt that she was not prepared through her college education to work with culturally and linguistically different students. And, regarding professional development, she remembered receiving no training on multicultural education, only in-services on differentiating instructional methods and children’s learning styles, and on how to react to the various behaviors of children.

Regarding culturally relevant practice within her own pedagogy, she shared,

I try to point out for each continent the different countries, the similar cultures and the different cultures, and I just want them to know that there are other cultures and you don’t laugh at it.

There is an inference in her response that she views herself as an advocate for different cultures by correcting students’ disparaging comments that poke fun at others from different cultures. When specifically asked how multiculturalism should be promoted in her classroom and the school, she shared,

Other than studying it, we do Martin Luther King for Black history month. We do a poster or some kind of project. I try to tie in someone like Ghandi with Martin Luther King. I feel as if that is part of the curriculum. That’s not anything above what I should be teaching, so I do try to remember if it is Hispanic Heritage week.

She continued,

Then the Black students get excited, and I can get some good projects from them because they are more into it, but at the same time when we are talking about civil rights and Martin Luther King, they really don’t know it because they did not live it the way we did and so it’s just one more history fact.

Mrs. Cleo’s conception of multiculturalism within her pedagogy was limited to isolated events, and most instructional activities on culture were not infused within students’ daily experiences or family life. This perhaps

explains her concern that students do not acquire a sense of the relevancy of cultural studies and the connection to their own lives, as she shared in the following:

Since I'm teaching social studies and we study about every continent, culture is part of the classwork. So we do cover it ... but when I present the word *culture* and examples of culture—they don't really tie it in together, they just see it as this is the way I live and *culture* is a social studies word.

She expounded further,

When we do talk about Apartheid, the separating of Black and White, the kids get a little nervous over talking about Blacks and Whites. You are not supposed to say that word. I am not supposed to say Black. If I say *Black*, then I am a racist.

Mrs. Cleo shared that whenever her social studies lessons are about a particular country or continent, the students have an opportunity to share personal accounts of their culture and where they are from. Moreover, she shared that she attempts to cover a particular country if she has predetermined where her students come from.

### **Mrs. Pearl**

At the time of this study, Mrs. Pearl was teaching eighth-grade science and was in her 17th year of teaching. She had been born in Houston, but her family moved to a rural area in Texas, where she grew up in a small, two-bedroom and one-bathroom home. She shared that her mother had an addiction challenge and her father was a racist, although he claimed that in the workplace all people, no matter what their race, should be treated fairly.

Growing up, she attended predominantly White schools with a few Blacks. Throughout all the interviews, Mrs. Pearl consistently referred to her experience at Prairie View A&M University, where she met her husband, who is African American. She implied that she has more of a connection and relationship with his family than with her own.

When asked about the changing demographics of the student population at her school, Mrs. Pearl noted that throughout her tenure, although student diversity has changed, the students in her pre-AP classes have not. "They are still mostly White kids," she said, although "I have lots of Hispanic kids now in my pre-AP classes." She did share that it was

difficult to determine because many are biracial or triracial, like her own children.

Regarding the increasing student diversity of the school, Mrs. Pearl identified the specific behavioral problems exhibited most recently. She shared, “We’re a lot more hyper in school. The kids are a lot louder. They move a lot more. Some of that’s cultural.” She continued, “I don’t mean to say that all Black people are loud, but there are certain groups, and it varies. I don’t know if that’s a cultural thing.”

During one interview, when Mrs. Pearl was asked to share her perception of diversity, she stated,

From a scientific perspective, the more ways that you can look at a situation, the more answers you can find. It’s seeing the different perspectives that helps science go farther, that helps cultures go farther because they understand each other and are working together.

In this description, Mrs. Pearl did not validate students’ cultural identities and the value of cultural experiences that students bring with them to the classroom.

Mrs. Pearl recognized that there are numerous perspectives to multicultural education and felt that it was her responsibility to teach her students to understand different cultures. Overall, when discussing how multiculturalism was promoted in her classroom, she mentioned the behaviors of her students and how they reacted to one another behaviorally. She shared that it was commonplace for the students in her classroom, including her own daughter, to make racist jokes to one another. She described it as a certain intermixing in which they get along with one another in a friendly but sarcastic manner. Further, Mrs. Pearl commented that although students are aware of the differences among them, it does not appear to matter to them about race or at least that race does not seem to be a factor to separate them. She shared more in her definition of multicultural education with this response: “Having different cultures gives different perspectives that enrich the conversation. It’s also taking into consideration where they come from.”

Mrs. Pearl explained her perception of how the students of diverse groups have changed from 10 years ago to now, but only in behavioral terms. She failed to mention any achievement changes that she has observed among her students. Mrs. Pearl views herself as being accepting of others. This stance appears to be supported by the fact that she is married to a man of a different race.

With respect to professional development, Mrs. Pearl shared, “I don’t think my course work in school helped me learn to teach at all.” She criticized in-services by saying, “I’ve pretty much taken that bad attitude with most of the courses and training because I felt like it was redundant after a while.” Mrs. Pearl provided details and specific ways in which she would improve her practice to help her students know the content and achieve but felt that the politics, limited flexibility, time constraints, and rules of state assessments hindered her from fully offering more innovative and creative teaching strategies. For a teacher to provide culturally relevant pedagogy, more is necessary than teaching the content information; teaching the whole child requires the teachers to generate different teaching styles and an appreciation for, as well as application of, cultural differences that will accommodate the vast learning differences of students (Paris & Alim, 2014; Saint-Hilare, 2014; Schmeichel, 2012; Smith, 2009; Ullman & Hecsh, 2011).

When asked how her teaching practice has changed, Mrs. Pearl shared that she pulls in students’ own stories to allow different views to be applied to science learning. This way, she argued, “they do see connections with each other and with science, and that’s what we try to do.” Lastly, Mrs. Pearl shared that she does not favor homogenous grouping because “that way they can diversify and learn and see from different perspectives. People growing up in two different kinds of cultures will look at things certainly differently, and that’s what you want them to do in science.”

### **Mr. Billy**

At the time of this study, Mr. Billy was a seventh-grade teacher of Texas history with over 20 years of experience in different capacities. Born in Texas, he had grown up in a low-socioeconomic, divorced family structure. He describes his upbringing as “poor white trash!” He remembers that when he was growing up in the 1960s, the neighborhood population consisted entirely of White people. Integration did not exist, only segregation.

Regarding Mr. Billy’s tenure at this school, he shared that the diversity of the student population had changed regarding ethnicity but not so much socioeconomically because most families were still from the lower middle class.

During one interview, Mr. Billy stated that he thought it was important to have the students understand that they are part of the American culture and should, in his words, “melt with it.” He further added, “I don’t want to insult your culture, but this is the way things are done in this country.” In a later interview, Mr. Billy changed his perception by stating that it is important to understand where the students come from so that you don’t step on their traditional family values or belief systems. However, he repeated his earlier

statement and said that “most of the kids just want to be kids. They don’t want you to ask, ‘Are you a Muslim? Are you a Jew? Are you a Christian?’ They don’t want labels.”

In another interview, Mr. Billy was asked if he believed that Hispanic students should speak only English. He did not address that question but stressed the importance of the Hispanic students becoming fluent in English, both written and oral, because they “live in America, and if they are going to pass a job interview and get a good-paying job, they need to speak the ‘Queen’s English’ effectively.”

Mr. Billy explained his perception of diversity and multicultural education as teachers touching students in a meaningful way and making sure that every child not only has an equal opportunity to learn but also does learn. He explained the definition of multicultural education as “all colors, ethnicities, and all races.” His perception of how to promote multiculturalism in the classroom involved teaching the students to be proud of being a Texan and an American. He did expound upon the challenge of addressing all students’ cultural backgrounds within curriculum, saying, “We don’t have time with all of the diversity in the classroom.”

When asked how he thought his “Whiteness” impacted his classroom, Mr. Billy insisted that it did not impact the classroom and that the “kids do not see color,” they only see themselves as people, they do not focus on differences. Mr. Billy added,

Maybe it was different if I was working in the Ghetto where the kids are taught that “Whitey is the devil or the White man is keeping you down,” but I’m not. I work in a suburban school and the kids are not taught that here.

He attributes being in the Ghetto to the fact that Black students are taught within their own culture how prejudices continue to work against them, resulting in students acting upon those prejudices that can negatively affect them. These frames of reference and the unexamined understanding of his Whiteness potentially lead to misunderstandings about the different cultural experiences of his students.

Mr. Billy felt that his course work in college did not effectively prepare him for working with diverse students. He had to build his knowledge base by immersing himself in actual classroom activities with the students. He stated that his personal goal was to continue to participate in additional staff development opportunities for diversity training and wished that more practical application and hands-on examples of how to teach to a diverse student population were being provided in the district. He could not

elaborate on any one instructional strategy that supported the learning of diverse students, other than being considerate of others.

Mr. Billy did believe that because he was a teacher of Texas history he could easily bring in lessons about all cultures living in America. He had difficulty specifically relating how he included students' cultures in his lessons.

Mr. Billy advocates that everybody be on the "same page in the same book." According to him, if kids are on different pages, then they can miss what's important in the curriculum. He stated that he is curriculum-driven and that what the district says and wants is law.

In general, Mr. Billy believes he is practicing culturally responsive teaching by building and maintaining relationships with the students and by providing a safe environment where they do not criticize one another and are free to ask questions in class. Mr. Billy felt he could empower students and build trust among them by ensuring that during discussions all viewpoints would count.

### **Ms. Iris**

At the time of this study, Ms. Iris was a social studies and science special education teacher with 19 years of experience. She had grown up in an all-White neighborhood in West Virginia. She did not begin to notice diversity until her junior high school years. To her recollection, there were not any Hispanics in her high school, only a few Jewish students, and a very small number of Black students. Her family was considered middle class.

Initially, she sought a position as a social worker for the school district but was talked into accepting a teacher's position by an administrator. She then went back to school for an advanced degree in special education.

During the 10 years before the study, Ms. Iris witnessed a big influx of Hispanics into the school. In relating her "Whiteness" to other cultures, Ms. Iris felt that her race did not impact her teaching and the learning process of her students. She mentioned that she had been raised in a large, tolerant, loving, and strict family, and that this upbringing had had more impact on her understanding of others' differences than her own race or culture. Therefore, she claimed that from this perspective, she might misinterpret some students' actions and might not understand that there are cultural and family background differences even in how one reacts to situations.

For example, she remembered her mother teaching her about having "grace" in how one treats another human being, which is not referring to race. She shared, "If little Bobby has holes in his socks, then you treat

him with just as much graciousness as anyone with a \$100 pair of sneakers.”

When asked for the definition of multicultural education, Ms. Iris responded, “a variety of cultures.” She believes that it is relatively easy to incorporate multicultural education in subjects such as language arts and social studies, but more difficult in her science class. She emphasized that she does not particularly associate multiculturalism as a goal or purpose for her classroom.

Ms. Iris reported that she does not have a lot to draw on regarding students’ cultural backgrounds, family values, and experiences in science class. Because she is so engrossed in planning and covering the content of her lessons, she does not have the time to stop and think of all the nationalities or races of the students in her classroom to readily incorporate their backgrounds and experiences in the lessons. She stated, “We are all working as a community.”

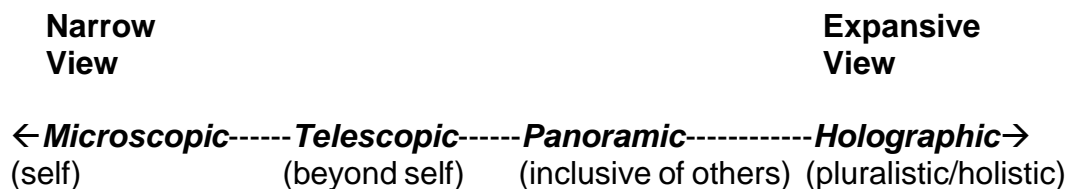
Ms. Iris shared that she does not believe that her college education or years of teaching have prepared her for working with a diverse student population. She also did not remember attending workshops related to addressing diversity.

Regarding incorporating culturally relevant curriculum, Ms. Iris did not provide any specific examples with her special needs students. She shared how paperwork requirements for special education monopolize her planning time. But, to establish and maintain relationships with her students, Ms. Iris emphasized that she attempts to gain a sense of trust and respect.

### **Cultural Lens Continuum**

As presented in the teacher profiles, participants shared their teaching experiences with diverse populations of learners and highlighted their perceptions of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching, described through their own self-perspective claims and cultural lens. Analysis revealed that participants’ individual views of cultural differences could be explained through their own cultural lens. The researchers reiterate that the cultural lens continuum was drafted as a heuristic structure for making meaning of the differing views of the participating teachers within this study. As shown in Figure 1, these lenses run across a metaphorical continuum from narrow views (microscopic) and limited perspectives (telescopic) to inclusive views (panoramic) and more expansive, holistic, three-dimensional perspectives (holographic). More in-depth explanation and discussion are provided in the subsequent sections.



**Figure 1.** The cultural lens continuum.**Microscopic**

With the microscopic view, individuals focus on the details of their own culture; therefore, their view of others' cultural differences is reflected back from and limited to a comparison of their own narrow perspective. Sometimes, human beings can be caught up in what is directly around them, seeing only what is in their own microcosm. At this level, their knowledge base is limited by egocentric views of their own cultural experiences, thereby resulting in limited awareness of the different belief systems, perspectives, and dispositions of other cultures. An individual with this lens may be able to demonstrate genuine caring for students in the classroom regardless of cultural background or family values. However, with regard to pedagogical implementation, a teacher with this lens may be unable or find it difficult to see, grasp, and engage in educational opportunities necessary for all students to be successful, including building on learners' own family values and strengths. Individuals at this level provide little, inadequate, or unconvincing evidence with which to expand and inform their perspectives and understanding of teaching practices that are effective in working with diverse student populations in the classroom. Case in point, teachers who are unaware, cannot acknowledge, or deny that socioeconomic status, family values, and cultural experiences are important and impactful to learning experiences, and who choose to ignore building these experiences within the school, are likely to present or adopt a color-blind perspective that can have negative or faulty pedagogical implications. In addition, teachers with this lens may equate cultural differences with deficiencies, either academically or behaviorally, which can negatively influence what they expect of their students.

**Telescopic**

Individuals with a telescopic view hope to identify, see, and understand phenomena beyond themselves, perhaps experiences outside their grasp but within their limited conceptual understanding. The main focus of a telescopic view is to make things look not only larger and closer, but also brighter and clearer. At this level on the cultural lens continuum, an

individual is asserting and or at least demonstrating that a microscopic view is either too small or too distant to allow accurate perceptions of different cultures. The telescopic view increases the viewer's perception of otherness, thereby bringing the subject or objects closer regarding the conceptual understanding of cultural differences. Also, at this level, an individual is more likely to be open to and flexible about teaching diverse cultures but may not possess the knowledge base that makes it possible to teach diverse cultures presenting different family values.

However, in actual practice, educators at this level often perceive the incorporation of multicultural education practices as superficial, an addendum, a separate lesson or special event. The implementation is inconsistent, and the value of connecting learning to make it relevant for all students is limited. There is no, or a constrained, invitation to bring in learners' family values and insight into instructional practices. At this level, the educator is still identifying students by their cultural group membership and then applying only bits and pieces of instructional strategies and lessons associated with the group's membership instead of focusing on teaching in greater depth or making more connections to specifically address the backgrounds of all learners. Metaphorically, at this level, objects or views look brighter, but there exists a limitation of distance in meeting the needs of learners because educators cannot tell exactly how far away the subject matter really is from the learners' existing experiential and conceptual knowledge base.

### **Panoramic**

Speculating on other, more complex, and fuller lenses through which educators may operate, a panoramic lens provides views of objects or scenes from a distance through a wide angle that allows an inclusive, full-circle perspective. The researchers propose that educators who are able to see the whole picture are more likely to be pedagogically adept and inclusive of students from different cultural backgrounds and family values within their instructional practices and interactions. With this lens, an educator's views and perceptions are inclusive of others from multiple cultural backgrounds. Teachers value and are aware of their own cultural identities, as well as those of their students. The actual practice of culturally relevant curriculum is evident within the pedagogy of an educator who has a panoramic cultural lens, as well as a demonstrated and enhanced understanding of the nature, goals, and potential of multicultural education. Educators with a panoramic lens understand what actual practice reveals about multiculturalism. The teacher and students are learning about the many dimensions of cultural diversity and experiences daily, and learners'

own family values are recognized within the curriculum. The manifestation of personal values and belief systems is aligned with students' experiences to create an inclusive learning environment. At this level, the teacher demonstrates interest in what is culturally appropriate or relevant for the culturally diverse student population in his or her classroom.

### **Holographic**

Speculating further on the cultural lens continuum, an educator who possesses and implements a holographic lens is culturally competent in all aspects of the teaching and learning process. This level encompasses components from the previously mentioned levels and extends beyond, most notably in depth of understanding and perception. Moreover, teachers at this level demonstrate all of the major domains of culturally relevant pedagogical tenets in their classroom instruction and teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). The holographic lens is presented as an ability to view a three-dimensional image and have an in-depth understanding of other cultures. The educator is able to view objects or issues from different angles and across multiple layers. In addition, the construction of knowledge by educators with a holographic lens is enhanced by openness to new ways of understanding a topic. This demonstrates an individual ability for a deeper level of reality. Objects that we see holographically are not separate parts, but aspects of a deeper unity of ideas and interrelated perspectives.

At a deeper level of reality, educators who possess a holographic lens do not pigeonhole the views of others based on their own cultural beliefs and perspectives, but rather have the awareness and capability to accept and understand multiple perceptual truths and reality from the perspectives of others. Synergistically, through this lens, the educator has an ongoing capacity for further development. A feature that is intrinsic to a holographic image is that the image or information appears to be cross-correlated with other images or information, so that totally separate images are simultaneously formed, as well as a unity of images. Every portion of the image is interconnected with the others; metaphorically, this aligns with the pillar goals of multicultural education.

Banks and Banks (2010) define the goals of multicultural education as the process of developing the knowledge and skills of students by including choices, cultural experiences, and differing perspectives in the teaching and curriculum in the classroom. Through the holographic lens, educators deliberately develop culturally sensitive curricula that integrate multicultural viewpoints and histories; apply instructional strategies that encourage all students to achieve, value, and recognize different family

backgrounds and values; and incorporate avenues of increasing educational equity.

The holographic cultural lens defines what is generated as culturally relevant pedagogy. None of the participants in this study exhibited this lens and this level of cultural relevance within their practice, but a holographic lens is an ideal to strive toward as a pedagogical goal.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

All of the teachers' personal experiences were influenced by sociocultural and historical contexts that can be intricately linked to aspects of life that go into the development of worldviews, beliefs about self in relation to others, understanding of the relationship of schooling to society, and other forms of personal, familial, and cultural understanding (Castro et al., 2012; Commins, 2014; Howard, 2006; Sleeter, 2001). Therefore, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background, geographical location, religious upbringing, family values, language, and previous life decisions all affect an individual's beliefs, which in turn affect learning to teach and teaching (Howard, 2006; Sleeter, 2001). These beliefs interplay with one's efficacy in teaching a diverse population of learners (Banks & Banks, 2010).

There are potential parallels in the cultural lens continuum and existing research on culturally relevant pedagogy, in that the type of lens one possesses indicates the level of responsiveness to and adoption of culturally relevant pedagogy. All participants followed a traditional, Eurocentric, nonprogressive curriculum in which students were not afforded an opportunity in which their own cultural backgrounds were highlighted and recognized within instructional practices. One participant did share that if she were afforded the time and resources, she would facilitate learning in a more cooperative and collaborative fashion with respect to culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogical strategies. Villegas and Lucas (2002) urge teachers to gain a strong sense of cultural identification by engaging in reflection and critical self-analysis to help establish meaningful interactions with their students and their learning in the classroom. Additionally, research findings from multiple studies demonstrate the power, impact, and significance of teachers immersing themselves in learners' communities, inviting parental involvement, and capitalizing on student-centered curriculum that highlights learners' language and knowledge (Cervantes, 2015; Commins, 2014; Okhremtchouk & González, 2014; Rolón-Dow & Chen, 2014; Saint-Hilare, 2014; Wyatt, 2014).

The most significant theoretical perspective to culturally relevant practice, as identified in the literature, is the teacher's ability to identify his or her cultural identity in relation to other cultural identities in the classroom

(e.g., Rychley & Graves, 2012). Howard (2006) asserts that the luxury of ignorance of the members of the dominant groups in society does not require them to know anything about people and cultures that are different from their own. He further states,

For our survival and the carrying on of the day-to-day activities of our lives, most White Americans do not have to engage in any meaningful personal connection with people who are different. This privileged isolation is not a luxury available to people who live outside of dominance and must, for their survival, understand the essential social nuances of those in power. The luxury of ignorance reinforces and perpetuates White isolation. (Howard, 2006, pp.15–16)

This acknowledgment has implications for understanding and relating to others. Therefore, such awareness influences the ways in which teachers treat traditional curricular expectations and share knowledge with students (Gay, 2010b; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2009; Maye, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Creating connectedness with the students in the classrooms is a relational component of pedagogy that must be explored further.

In summary, the participants in this study mostly aligned within two categories of the cultural lens continuum (microscopic and telescopic), with one participant teetering on the panoramic lens. The final construct (holographic) was not supported in the data but rather emerged as an interpretation of what could be generated through culturally relevant pedagogy. If educators possessed and practiced teaching with a holographic lens, which requires cultural awareness and pedagogical skills, then they would be considered culturally relevant and responsive teachers. The findings of this study have direct implications for advancing educators' pedagogical cultural competence—specifically, through the inclusion of curricular activities that capitalize on family history, background, and values. These aspects of family strengths are foundational for optimizing a learning environment and are crucial elements of teacher knowledge for employing a panoramic or holographic cultural competence. Suggestions are explicated in the following sections.

### **Strategies for Advancing Pedagogical Cultural Competence**

Effective teachers are aware of the White privilege, individual presumptions, and potentially limited experiences that inform their teaching beliefs and practices. To enhance teachers' cultural competence and move them toward panoramic or holographic views and perspectives, there are

personal and pedagogical strategies that they can employ within their practice. Because the diversity of learners continues to flourish, the discussion that follows focuses on specific strategies to assist Texas teachers in understanding how learners' cultural history, influences, and family values can be included within curriculum to generate a more inclusive, equitable, and socially just learning environment (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007). The growing Hispanic community is significant in this study; therefore, suggestions are tailored to that cultural group—most notably, regarding identities and family values. The authors of this paper acknowledge an inherent complexity within what we identify as a nuanced Hispanic community comprising multiple languages, races, and cultural values. Therefore, the following discussion presents broad, overarching suggestions for teachers to enhance their cultural competence.

**Know self, know learners, and create a learning family through dialogue.** In an effort to engage in effective, culturally responsive practices, teachers first and foremost need to examine and understand their own cultural history, background, and upbringing because doing so will assist them in gaining awareness of others' cultures and how different cultural influences and behaviors affect the teaching and learning process (Cardelle-Elawar, 1992). Once teachers recognize and connect to their own culture and identity, it is easier for them to relate to the culture of their students and the students' families (Reissman, 1994). Ideally in this process, educators would share some aspects of their cultural heritage with their class as an invitation for students to share in a reciprocal fashion. Many instructional strategies encourage and employ class discussions, dialogue, and the sharing of personal perspectives in order for learners to develop a critical consciousness regarding their personal views. Therefore, this is a natural process that allows students to make individual statements about their identity, and *in general*, it can be used across grade levels and content areas. The obvious caveat in this suggestion is the time necessary to implement the process. But more importantly, as students share, the teacher gains valuable information about each learner, and learners more implicitly understand their environment through their own identity, language, and culture. Therefore, educators need to implement learners' "lived" experiences that are meaningful in the classroom—most notably, learners' family values, traditions, and backgrounds (Harris-Russell, 2012). Additionally, the exchange of histories and viewpoints within this environment potentially generates a trusting connection in which members can freely discuss similarities and differences of experiences without judgment. These exchanges advocate acceptance for all, thus promoting mutual respect and the values of diversity that enrich and promote social

growth of the learners (Harris-Russell, 2012). Identities within this learning community are therefore accepted unconditionally, similarly to how family members acknowledge each other.

**Know families and invite parents to contribute to the learning milieu.** Culturally competent pedagogues take every opportunity to link family and community to the curriculum taught in their classrooms so that educational equity is evident in instructional practices (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Family information and involvement of families are a curricular resource. A culturally responsive teacher would create forums or avenues for exploring diverse ideas, heritages, and traditions of others by involving parents (Gay, 2002; Harris-Russell, 2012; Schechter & Sherri, 2008; Turner-Vorbeck, 2005).

Regarding Hispanic families, research indicates that these parents are most likely to participate in their children's schooling experience when the teacher personally invites them (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & McRoy, 2015; Walker, Ice, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011) because this demonstrates that the teacher values the family's home-base knowledge (De Gaetano, 2007) and that their cultural values and family experiences will be employed in constructing inclusive instructional activities (Altschul, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). An invitation for parents to directly contribute to and engage in class activities empowers the parents (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Warren, 2011) and affords the teacher opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of his or her learners and the learners' cultural backgrounds. This knowledge can provide the teacher greater insight for developing a more panoramic or holographic view toward their cultural competence.

Additionally, Nieto (1996) has highlighted the importance of teachers' genuine exchanges, interactions, and discussions with parents in getting to know learners' families. Other researchers have emphasized the importance and types of effective teacher communication with parents (Reynolds et al., 2015; Wong & Hughes, 2006). Multiple approaches have been suggested, but with parents who are Hispanic, a home visit by the teacher is a direct action that helps the teacher better understand the parents' "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 132) and best utilize family strengths (Hughes, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2015). In addition to establishing a connection and fostering a relationship and rapport with parents, this additional family perspective of information allows the teacher to accommodate learners' needs by selecting curriculum and shaping instructional strategies that are more closely aligned with and inclusive of

students' existing experiential knowledge (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Harris-Russell, 2014).

There do exist significant challenges to parent involvement as a result of language barriers, time constraints, and the preexisting perceptions of some minority families (Turney & Kao, 2009). Teachers need to be aware and respectful of these possible disadvantages, and research indicates that some low-income and/or ethnic/racial minority parents are less likely to participate in certain forms of involvement in their children's schooling (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Wong & Hughes, 2006). But, this goal must be maintained because there is strong evidence that parents' involvement in their children's education and schooling promotes many positive effects, including academic achievement and lower dropout rates (García Coll et al., 2002; Jeynes, 2007). Lastly, having parents as partners in the instructional process will assist learners in generalizing skills across situations and settings.

According to Swick, Boutte, & Van Scoy (1995), school–family curricular activities and teacher–parent partnership initiatives, such as bulletin boards, newsletters, advisory groups, field trips, celebrations, classroom presentations (e.g., cultural dances, historical stories, family traditions, unique crafts), and other events in which parents can augment awareness and understanding of cultural diversity, greatly increase students' multicultural awareness and help bind the learning community. Additionally, family photos, family books, and/or family trees could be shared (Reissman, 1994). A class family tree could be created and displayed; students would then conduct an analysis of similarities and differences across cultures (Harris-Russell, 2012). These are just a few key strategies that would enhance acceptance and the inclusion of family diversity within learners' schooling experiences. Bottom line: family involvement is key in assisting students in understanding their uniqueness and how their lives contribute to society.

### Conclusion

It is hoped that the cultural lens continuum will assist reflective educators in gaining insight into their own current perspective from which they view curriculum and potentially incite a shift in their cultural awareness and perspectives. This awareness alone can assist practitioners to increase culturally responsive teaching practices and inspire them to seek or acquire a holographic stance within their own pedagogy. Broader lenses must be adopted to best ensure that culturally sensitive curricula will be developed from multiple viewpoints and histories, so that culturally relevant pedagogy can be implemented. The authors have suggested multiple means by which



culturally responsive teachers can expand their own cultural competence through family involvement. These types of direct actions will help students grow academically and develop a critical or sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Additionally, teachers who possess a holographic lens can, with learners' families, construct knowledge in new ways that enhance students' understanding of a topic or content. Educators with a holographic stance will be less likely to pigeonhole others' views from their own cultural perspectives because they possess the capability to understand multiple perceptual truths and realities. Thus, culturally competent teachers are better equipped to create a learning environment in which students learn by being valued within society.

As educators work to strengthen their cultural adeptness, they can periodically assess their place along this proposed cultural lens continuum, which specifies unique ways of seeing and responding to teaching pedagogies with diverse student populations. A reflective practitioner can use the continuum to self-assess and identify where along the continuum his or her practice currently falls (Rychly & Graves, 2012; Saint-Hilare, 2014). This awareness alone can assist practitioners to increase culturally responsive teaching practices, apply the suggestions provided in this paper, and add some of their own pedagogical ideas; ultimately, these actions will inspire them to seek or acquire a holographic stance toward cultural awareness.

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