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# An Autoethnography of Culturally Relevant Leadership as Moral Practice: Lived Experiences through a Scholar-Practitioner Lens

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### **Abstract**

In this autoethnography, I am concerned with cultural relevance as an experience of a scholar-practitioner educational leader. I question my own cultural competence as a teacher and school principal. Turning a reflective gaze on my lived experiences as an educator creates a space in which I attempt to make meaning of the phenomenon of culturally relevant practices in the field of education. As an act of pedagogical and personal meaning-making, this autoethnographic work centers on the value of cultural relevance as informed by scholarly practice.

### **Keywords**

Autoethnography, Culturally Relevant Practices, Educational Leadership, Ethical Sensitivity, Scholar-Practitionership

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## **An Autoethnography of Culturally Relevant Leadership as Moral Practice: Lived Experiences through a Scholar-Practitioner Lens**

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*In this autoethnography, I am concerned with cultural relevance as an experience of a scholar-practitioner educational leader. I question my own cultural competence as a teacher and school principal. Turning a reflective gaze on my lived experiences as an educator creates a space in which I attempt to make meaning of the phenomenon of culturally relevant practices in the field of education. As an act of pedagogical and personal meaning-making, this autoethnographic work centers on the value of cultural relevance as informed by scholarly practice. Keywords: Autoethnography, Culturally Relevant Practices, Educational Leadership, Ethical Sensitivity, Scholar-Practitionership*

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We had the experience but missed the meaning, / And approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form. . . . (Eliot, 1943, stanza II, lines 45-47)

Fundamentally, this inquiry is merely an attempt to “understand the beautiful forms of things human” (Greenfield, 1984, p. 145). Methodologically, I desire to “approach the meaning” of my past practices in order to “restore the experience / In a different form.” Drawing directly from Bochner (2012), this autoethnographic inquiry frames research texts as acts of meaning. As Bochner probed,

If we experience our lives as stories, then why not represent them as stories? Why shouldn't social scientists represent life as temporally unfolding narratives and researchers as a vital part of the action? Shouldn't there be a closer connection between our research texts and the lives they represent? (p. 157)

In line with this questioning, my inquiry offers a narrative that is intended to present “emotional, dialogic, and collaborative truths” to the reader (p. 161). As such, this narrative alternates between vignettes of the researcher's underlying first-person lived experiences and a reflective approach to inquiry that attempts to understand two distinct events.

The events presented here are first-person lived experiences from my days as a scholar-practitioner educational leader—first, as a bilingual classroom teacher, and second as an elementary school principal—told using a reflexive, narrative (auto)ethnographic frame. The data for these personal lived experiences were collected from journaling made while a classroom teacher and an elementary school principal and scholarly reflections on the pedagogical events. These entries were analyzed and retold “using hindsight” in a critical autobiographical manner, as a socially-conscious act (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). As Ellis et al. have noted, “As a method, autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. When writing an autobiography, an author retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences” (para. 5). In addition to being a socially-conscious act, the autoethnographic approach employed here attempted thoroughness through “epiphanies that

stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (para. 8).

As an educator identifying with the dominant culture, this approach strongly resonated with me. The reflexive and revelatory voice is mostly absent from the literature on culturally relevant practice and leadership. The autobiographical lived experiences and the pedagogical lived experiences of the students were matters of not only two distinct cultural experiences, but together form a singular cultural experience—a shared experience—within the educative space where we had our collective experience. For this reason, I acknowledge, as Ellis et al. (2011) stated, a need to engage in “telling” and “showing” to give “readers some distance from the events described so that they might think about the events in a more abstract way” (para. 11).

The intentional examination of these lived experiences along with the moral analyses of the inquiry form an act of meaning in that it examines questions of the value, or axiological nature, of scholarly informed and culturally relevant practice. In doing so, the goal is to present this valuing as an act of making meaning in the autoethnographic sense through the presentation of two lived experiences—one as a teacher in a bilingual classroom, the other as a principal of a school with multicultural programs. I examine each of these lived experiences through an axiological lens, questioning and reflecting on my own values of cultural relevance.

By doing so through a reflexive autoethnographic approach, I attempt to provide a unique look into the ethical/moral work of a practitioner as it relates to the value of culturally relevant pedagogy and leadership. The narrative plays out within the strict cultural context of a conservative region of the U.S. However, my focus is one of global and transnational concern. Immigration and resettlement are global phenomena, and therefore it is my hope that the lived experiences and the reflexive axiological inquiries that I share in this work can be interpreted in respect to the dilemmas of cultural relevance faced by educators and educational leaders in a variety of locations around the world.

### **Lived Experience #1: The Bilingual Teacher**

From the 2003-2004 to the 2005-2006 school year, I was the lead teacher for a newly implemented program serving recent immigrant students in the East Texas district where I worked. The Newcomer Program was designed to

Emphasize the mastery of English language skills, as well as mathematics, science and social studies, enabling ELL’s to participate effectively and equitably in the teaching/learning process through the state’s curriculum, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and the English Language Standards (ELPS; district website).

At this time, the demographics for the district were beginning to diversify at an extremely significant rate, and an unspoken expectation was embedded in the hidden curriculum of the program—acclimatization and acculturation.

At the high school, its 1,190 students were 23% African American, 22% Hispanic, and 54% White. The campus was 50% economically disadvantaged with only 5% of its students being served as limited English proficient. The professional staff consisted of 95% White teachers and 5% African American teachers, with no Hispanic educators.

The middle school, a seventh and eighth grade campus of 642 students, was made up of 23% African Americans, 28% Hispanics, and 48% Whites. Of these students, 64% had a status of lower socio-economic. Seven percent only were labeled limited English proficient. Teacher demographics revealed a staff of 90% White and 8% African American with a single Hispanic teacher who represented the 2% remaining.

The almost 700 students attending the fifth and sixth grade intermediate were comprised of approximately 23% African American students, 34% Hispanic students, and 43% White students. Forty-three teachers were White, five were African American, and two were Hispanic.

During the 2003-2004 academic year, only 25% of ninth grade Hispanic students passed the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) mathematics test—down from the 36% that had passed the TAAS the year before. Only 34% of tenth grade Hispanic students passed the state's English language arts exam for the same administration. For Hispanic students taking the exit exam, students were consistently lower than their White and African Americans in English language arts, science, and social studies—scoring only 1% higher than African Americans in mathematics. A mere 53% passed the English language arts test compared to the 88% of White students that passed.

In the middle school, Hispanic seventh graders were beginning to do somewhat better than their African American counterparts but were continuing to perform significantly lower than White students. At the eighth-grade level, local educators viewed Hispanic students as being consistently outperformed by the other races. At the intermediate level, for fifth and sixth grades combined, Hispanic students taking the TAKS were scoring much lower than both of their peer subsets in reading, alongside African Americans, Hispanic results were significantly lower than White scores in all other subjects.

**Development of a newcomer program.** Up until this point in time, a bilingual program has been implemented on only one of the four elementary campuses. Under the previous bilingual coordinator and well supported by the director at the time, North East Elementary had adopted and adapted a dual language enrichment program based on Gomez and Gomez's (1999, 2000) 50/50 two-way immersion model. In this program, students in pre-kindergarten are taught in the dominant home language; kindergarten through first grade students are taught reading and language arts, science, and social studies in Spanish, with mathematics taught in English. From second grade through fourth grade, reading/language arts is split between English and Spanish instruction; science and social studies are continued in Spanish, and English instruction continues in mathematics. Often, depending on staffing and leadership, this pattern is modified or manipulated—for example, starting with the second semester, students are most likely to be taught only in the language in which they will take the TAKS test.

The other three elementary campuses—North West, South West, and South East—practice pedagogical methods based on sheltered instruction observational protocol (SIOP), known simply as Sheltered English. While one campus, South East Elementary, boasts an Exemplary rating, only 78% of their Hispanic students pass the third-grade reading compared to the 92% of African American students and >99% of White students that passed. The Exemplary rating is possible by claiming state allowed exemptions in a single area of measurement. The 41% prevalent Hispanic student population at North West is ranking alongside their categorical fellow students in third grade, with 90% passing reading and 93% passing mathematics (both African American and White students still outscored them); at the fourth-grade level Hispanic students dominated in the areas of reading and writing, but only 53% pass mathematics. South West Elementary, rated as Recognized by the state, has only 64% of their Hispanic students passing the third grade state assessment in reading, compared to 92% White and 86% African American. Similarly, in fourth grade, only 66% of Hispanic students pass the high-stakes reading test, with 88% White students and 75% African American students passing the same exam. Looking at the lack of success at the secondary level, longitudinal success of the models currently in place was questionable.

It is in this context that the district begins looking at newcomer models across the state. Several districts are visited or interviewed, including Coppell, Conroe, Mission, and Lufkin.

As a bilingual teacher on one of the elementary campuses, I am asked to go along on some of these school visits. The district agrees to create a program that will service the children of recent immigrants to be housed at the middle school and North East Elementary which are located next to one another on the same plot of district land. Originally, the bilingual director proposed a program that would serve students at the secondary level, beginning at the middle school. However, due to the stresses of testing and concerns of test scores, principals on the elementary campuses pushed for a service that will take in newly arrived immigrants at the elementary as well. They argued that students are exempt from state testing for the mandated duration of time and only distract resources from students who will actually be taking the TAKS.

The final model as agreed upon would serve students from third grade up to tenth grade. English, reading, and social studies/history would be taught with English acquisition in mind, with Spanish support as needed. Science and mathematics will be taught in Spanish to ensure that comprehensible input occurs. The students will be grouped into two classes: an elementary class with students in third through sixth grade and a secondary class with students ranging from sixth grade to tenth grade.

**Experiences as a newcomer teacher.** My entire experience as the newcomer ELA/Social Studies teacher brings new nuances to the term cultural relevance. At times I feel like *I am* the stranger in their world; I am certain they feel like strangers in mine. Often, they tell me so. Students in the program struggle with issues relating to identity and issues of “home.” They are often homesick (a phenomenon which I realize has no equivalent in Spanish). Grandparents are missed, as are other family members, friends, and classmates back in their home countries. These students encounter something that I assume is much like a sense of being lost or misplaced. The house in which they live here is obviously much nicer than what they describe back home, but it is not home, only a house to which they have been brought—to stay, to reside, to sojourn perhaps?

I witness episodes of extreme depression—the sadness is almost tangible at times in the lines of their young faces and the depth of darkness to their eyes. I see incidents of tiredness—too many people sharing too small of a house. Poor sleeping arrangements are a common complaint. In the beginning, frustration is a common theme in our newcomer classroom. Many times we become frustrated with each other. I feel they lack motivation and simply do not care to learn; they feel I am too overbearing and simply do not care about them. In fact, they think the school does not care. The structure in which we are housed is a “portable building” that had been constructed by the district. It is separate from the middle school’s main building by a street and it had for some time been empty. On the floors between the desks and running the length of the rows are two outdated classroom speech and listening labs, designed to be mounted to a lift in the ceiling. I believe the intention was to install these in the newcomer classroom; however, it was determined that the framework in the portable would not be able to bear the load. These were just left and now we walked over them daily, waiting for maintenance to come remove them. Also, to the back of the room, heaps of boxes are piled—these are materials used by the discipline program that uses the same facility after school. No matter what I do to brighten up the classroom, it does not feel “remembered,” and likewise we do not either.

Not only do many of the Anglo students with whom my students interact make unintelligible comments under their breath and cast judgmental glances at them, but also the “Americanized” Hispanic students do as well. In fact, the fellow Hispanic students—those that confuse the acquisition of English with social status—are less forgiving than many Anglo students. I see it in their eyes, in their glances at one another. It’s also in their glares at me when I encourage them to try to understand the new universe in which they find themselves. Their

bodies create distance, slumped down in their old desks, arms crossed over their chests, heads turned toward blank windows.

In many ways I am ill equipped to support them. My empathetic nature only goes so far. I had spent the majority of life growing up within a ninety-mile radius of the district where I live and teach. My grandparents ate the same foods that were served in the cafeterias. My parents' skin was mostly the same shade of "white" as my teachers. My aunts and uncles went to the same churches that my teachers attended. My friends spoke the same language and all used the same idioms. My cultural experience was in no way *different*. Now here I was charged with the obligation to teach 34 to 36 children that for the most part had been born 1,600 miles away in central Mexico. Many of them had likely traversed hazardous terrain and treacherous conditions to get here. I had only the struggle of acquiring a certified degree of proficiency in their language to my credit. I want nothing more than to connect with these children in the present, to teach them of the past, to prepare them for the future. But can I say that I *understand* them? I speak their language, but I cannot *speak* their experiences. The words I employ are adequate, but the culturally infused connotations are too often alien to my East Texas paradigm. I know the customs of their lives, but I have never lived them. How can I understand the real schema, which they use to interpret the world they see? How can I apprehend the *pathos* of their lived experiences?

I can look out on the same landscape as you, or as with Schutz's (1932/1967) example, we can both watch a bird in flight, but all we can really know is that we both see a horizon or a flying bird. We cannot know how the other feels about seeing these things. Schutz (1932/1967) stated, "In real life we never experience the 'pure existence' of others; instead we meet real people with their own personal characteristics and traits" (p. 164). As an educator, I hope to somehow obtain empathy in the mutual experiences lived with my students. But really knowing exactly how they feel about their experience is a mute and distant dialogue.

On campus and in class, my students experience the culturally bound attitudes, behaviors, and customs of East Texas. They themselves exhibit actions, beliefs, and characteristics that they have brought with them from home. We see these things and attempt to define the Otherness in ourselves. Initially, the relationship is one-sided. We rebel against one another—they against me, in the hope of preserving their identity in a place to which they did not ask to come, and I against them, in the name of academic performance and my belief that they need to be accepted to be successful. But we are growing older together, engaging in a reciprocal face-to-face We-relationship as teacher-students and student-teachers (Freire, 1970/2005). Over time I begin to connect with each of them in unique ways. I still feel a need to push them; they still feel a need to push back.

I receive no support or resources from either of the campus principals charged with oversight of the program's corresponding levels. I believe that neither administrator fully understands his or her roles in respect to this program or its relationship to the schools. In this sense, I too am the Other alongside of the students—a cultural stray without homeland. Together we are isolated, segregated, in some ways resented, and housed in an abandoned portable structure in the school's backyard. As one principal had told me, "You're here because you're bilingual; not because you're a great teacher."

Over time the demographics of the Newcomer Program shift. During the first year of the program, the 16 third, fourth, fifth, and sixth graders are all from Mexico, either from Guanajuato, Zacatecas, or Tamaulipas. Seventeen of the 18 seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth graders are from Mexico and one from Honduras. The 17 students from Mexico are from Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Oaxaca, and the Federal District.

My last year teaching in the program, while the students are still chiefly from Mexico, two secondary students are from Taiwan and spoke Mandarin; two others, one at the elementary level and one at the secondary level, have arrived from Cambodia. The importance of my ability

to communicate with students and parents in Spanish has diminished, as has my belief that I can be culturally relevant as a teacher.

The students I teach during this time represent a number of immigrant students in American schools. However, they are unique individuals and elude any homogenous grouping. Nevertheless, their collective portrait presents an overview of students that spans an indeterminate timeframe in which students entered into the immigrant program and exited into mainstream classes or returned to their respective homes.

**The students.** Josue is a seventh grader with an intellectual disability who has been mainstreamed to my newcomer class because the school cannot provide him with special education support in Spanish. Susana, Josue's little sister, is in third grade and she always looks out for her brother. Their father has been in the country for many years working in a local factory. In Mexico, Josue and Susana's father was himself a teacher, but here in the U.S. he is a minimum wage employee who never fails to tell me how grateful he is for a job and to me for teaching his children English.

Alex is an eighth grader who has not been in school since he was a second grader in Mexico. He can spell his first name but not his last, Vega. Rico is a seventh-grade boy. He is never very motivated and often resents that his parents uprooted him from his home in Mexico and brought him to a place where he feels disconnected. He often tells me how he does not like it because he does not fit in and tells me daily that he thinks the schoolwork is useless. Three years from now he will drop out and later be killed in a violent gang-on-gang shooting—I will sit there in front of my television, staring at the image of local news anchor in disbelief, wondering silently to myself what I could have done differently.

Marla left Mexico as an eleventh grader but agrees to be classified a tenth grader when the district tried to refuse her entrance into school. She never questions the work, is an excellent writer, and loves to read. Katy, another tenth grader, came later in the year but excels, learning English at significant rate. Later, after she and Marla have graduated, they will see me in the local Walmart and thank me for preparing them so well for the work they had to do in high school. Much later I will hire Katy as a teacher's aide on my campus; when I hire her, she has been attending the local community college for a year and is hoping to go on to become a teacher. A few years later, after I have moved on, Katy will become a teacher at that same school.

Kyle, a seventh grader, and Catherine, a ninth grader, are from Taiwan. Kyle, by far the most proficient English speaker, had been to school in Great Britain and is one of only two American citizens in the newcomer program (he was born in the U. S. when his parents were college students here). Catherine quickly bridges the language barrier and befriends the other high school girls. They teach each other Chinese and Spanish faster than I can teach them English.

**Culturally relevant strategies.** Although I am certified as a bilingual teacher in Texas and have studied a significant amount of literature on bilingual education, I enter the newcomer program without a background to support a multicultural pedagogy. I have read a great deal of work by Stephen Krashen, James Asher, and Jim Cummins. I spend a lot of time emphasizing my ability to communicate with Spanish-speaking parents and ensuring that I can ensure that students will be provided comprehensible input and instruction. The district's unofficial statement is that my job is to make sure that these students acquire an adequate level of English proficiency to immerse them in their mainstream classes after one year.

As a bilingual teacher I feel that I know language acquisition; as a teacher I think that I understand pedagogy. Retrospectively, nothing I do as the teacher of recent immigrant students



has to do anything specifically with making my classroom a more culturally relevant learning environment *per se*. For me—to use Ladson-Billings' title—it is just a matter of good teaching.

The first strategy I lean on is ensuring that I communicate often with parents. Not only do I send home parent notices, I also invite parents to orientations and conferences, and attempt to teach them about district policy, school procedure, and community mindsets. Although the elementary and middle school principals do enforce campus expectations for students when the students are at their respective schools all of the classroom discipline for the program is left to me. Keeping lines of positive communication open with parents is non-negotiable.

Next, I utilize every possible strategy I have read about to engage the multi-leveled class groups. Most importantly is choice. I am accountable for covering a vast array of state mandated standards. But I create choice charts which allow the students to decide how they will demonstrate the information they have learned. Among the choices I generally offer are poems, essays, posters, presentations, rap songs, paintings, brochures, and dioramas. In addition, I develop “worksheets” that list tasks related to all the standards I must cover in a subject and color-code them by grade level, then assign the tasks based on gaps or prior educational opportunities or determined by data from assessments.

About once each six weeks, I assign either a product to be created in a cooperative learning group or a projects-based learning opportunity. Predominantly, their assignments center on major historical and cultural events in the U.S. that share parallels with other countries, namely Latin American countries. To begin the year, we do a two-week long celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. I integrate reading, writing, and a review of important Hispanic-American historical figures and scientists according to their grade level's social studies requirements. I introduce Joseph Marion Hernández, Henry Cisneros, Jaime Escalante, and Ellen Ochoa. Some of them read and write reviews on works by Gary Soto and Sandra Cisneros. Other students present biographies on Juan Seguíñ or Cesar Chavez.

I collaborate with the middle school Spanish teacher to plan a lesson around the similarities and differences between Halloween and *El Día de los Muertos*. Using bulletin board paper, my secondary group decorates the classroom with the red, orange, yellow, purple, pink, white, and black associated with the Day of the Dead in Mexico. They write papers either describing what each color symbolizes or narrating an experience they remember about a loved one who has passed away. They also fashion an altar in the classroom out of cardboard boxes and bring the food, washbowls, and flowers—*las ofrendas* or offerings—from home. Mentally, physically, and emotionally, they are engaged in this schoolwork. It shows in their movement and mindset, and in the way that they cooperate as they attend to the tasks. The seventh and eighth grade students from the middle school Spanish class—mostly Anglo students—are our guests, and they hear papers read in Spanish and translated to English by students.

Finally, I try to vary the assessments used to collect data. Still sections of the released Spanish and English versions of the state tests from the Texas Education Agency's website are copied for benchmarking purposes as required by the school. My fellow program teacher and I develop rubrics to assess their presentations, projects, and portfolios. He and I also create teacher-developed tests to evaluate information we are currently teaching. Some of these are short answer essay, others fill in the blank or cloze procedure type quizzes. I employ techniques from guided reading models to level my students by reading ability in order to address specific comprehension concerns.

In the spring, even though the students have been in the U.S. for less than a year they take the linguistically accommodated TAKS test in mathematics and will be rated on their second language progress by the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS). The TELPAS objectively measures a second language learner's ability in listening, speaking, writing, and tests the child's reading ability with the Reading Proficiency Test in English (RPTE). Overall the students do not perform well on their assessments. In fact, the

results show that the majority of students did not even meet minimum standards. The district bilingual coordinator tells me not to worry, scores will be viewed only as a baseline to measure future student growth.

### **Axiological Inquiry #1**

The first concern for this inquiry is whether or not cultural relevance informed by scholarly practice can be actualized as a critical value in the diverse setting described. To analyze this question, one must look at what cultural relevance in instructional environments *potentially* means. Cultural relevance manifests under various terms—namely, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and multicultural education. Even terms such as cultural intelligence and cultural competence must connote some aspect of relevant cultural understanding. Assuming the theorists originating these ideas have chosen appropriate labels, educational practitioners attempting to make the theory-practice crossover must interpret them with a degree of critical reasoning and attention to application needs. One such rationale is that the notions of cultural competence, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and multicultural education infer a form of instruction and teaching strategies that relate to, respond to, and/or are pertinent to a learner's particular cultural nuances—language and linguistic patterns, social interpretations, influence of home-life, customs and traditions, and community's belief-value system. Another way of framing this is that teachers need not be necessarily literate in the specificity of any one culture but that they are culturally aware and sensitive, able to recognize and respect that different cultures bring varying attitudes, behaviors, and conditions to the classroom.

Regardless, the theory of cultural relevance does not mean simply inserting cultural elements or artifacts into a lesson, such as token words from a given language/dialect or the food of a particular people/nation. Instead, no matter what label is used, the matter of cultural relevance is more deeply defined. Ladson-Billings (1995) stated,

Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience academic success, (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the current status quo of the social order. (p. 160)

Supposing Ladson-Billings' statement is accurate, to what extent should this impact student achievement? In a society measuring the complete success of the child's progress on a single data point within a 10-month period certain features of the system prove problematic. High-stakes tests assess a broad range of students with varying degrees of cultural backgrounds, and the success of these students is published as percentages based on extreme ranges of socio-economic status, language proficiency, and learning needs. The accountability of schools is framed as quantifiable ranges of ethnicity, socio-economic status, language proficiency, and learning needs, not on students' worldviews. No legislative measures exist at the state or federal level to guarantee that assessment will be varied based on individual learning styles or cultural norms and no evaluation is mandated to measure an educator's cultural intelligence or responsiveness. Only a handful of states even guarantee that immigrant students—and only if the population is significant—will be instructed in a manner that ensures comprehensible input. If only a small number of teachers and leaders independently embrace culturally relevant methods, to what extent can they actually impact or even determine student achievement? Within a system such as this, in some form or fashion, inequities are going to exist.

Ladson-Billings' (1995) propositions also assumed that students are respected in a way that permits them to think critically of the campuses and the districts where they attend school.

For this to occur, educators would need to be *culturally proficient* (Lindsey, Graham, Westphal, & Jew, 2008). Lindsey et al.'s theory asserted,

Cultural proficiency is about being effective in cross-cultural situations. . . . [C]ultural proficiency is about educating all students to high levels of knowing, valuing, and using their cultural backgrounds, languages, and learning styles within the context of our teaching. A central tenet of cultural proficiency holds that change is an *inside-out* process in which a person is, first and foremost, a student of his own assumptions. (p. 20)

In the classroom this implies that a teacher “must be able to recognize [his or her] own assumptions in order to retain those that facilitate culturally proficient actions and to change those that impede such actions” (p. 20). But can the interactions, decisions, and solutions of a single educator based on his or her own lived experiences and stock of knowledge be capable of countering standards and mandates enough to ensure that students have a culturally relevant experience?

Cultural relevance and its complementary theories cause some problems to surface. Primarily the issue of cross-cultural experience is brought into question. What is the capacity for individuals from one particular socio-cultural in-group to fully understand and relate to individuals brought up in another distinctive way of doing? Without cross-cultural experiences is it possible for a person to recognize his or her assumptions about other cultures or even his or her own culture for that matter?

One has to question the capacity of one teacher to be all things to all students. In a classroom of 22 students, there are potentially 22 distinct and varying degrees of cultures and a seemingly innumerable number of worldviews (regional usage gradations and dialectic variations hint at an infinite number of socio-cultural perspectives). A person from Oaxaca uses a Spanish verb that does not necessarily mean the same thing as in Zacatecas. A parent from Saudi Arabia and a parent from Somalia can perceive the role of education from very distinct paradigms. Individuals from Texas and Ohio can interpret intended meanings very differently from one another. When a classroom fills up with 20-plus representatives from all these divergent backgrounds in what way should educators “differentiate instruction for learning style, readiness, interest, experiences, and students’ language and linguistic styles” (Lindsey et al., 2008, p. 11)?

According to Schlein and Garii (2011), “The narratives that we examined demonstrate possible linkages between experiences with teaching abroad and potential shifts in personal and professional identities. At the same time, explorations across our inquiries of cross-cultural teaching illuminate variations among such experiences” (p. 90). These linkages indicate prerequisite cross-cultural experiences or teaching abroad experiences, which act as a catalyst for cultural competence and cultural sensitivity. Does this exclude teachers who have never had study abroad opportunities or cross-cultural experiences from culturally relevant pedagogy? Can cultural relevance be made a performance standard that can be taught as part of an educational leadership or teacher preparation program?

Observably, empirical studies (Hyland, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Weaver, 2009; Zirkel, 2008) indicate that although some educators succeed in bridging cultural differences others struggle to be anything more than *aware of differences*. The development of cultural responsiveness noted in these studies can easily be viewed as an ongoing affair. In either case, none of these studies insinuate that either culturally relevant pedagogy or leadership directly impacted student success on high-stakes standardized assessments. Therefore, should cultural relevance not be valued?

Or is the essentially important aspect of cultural relevance one that can be measured by a standards-based test? As Kafele (2009) stated,

You must always keep at the forefront of your mind that you are a teacher of students first, and of subjects second. The human factor must always be the first priority. It is so much easier for students to learn from those they know, like, and trust than from those with whom they have no relationship. (p. 10)

If so, perhaps cultural relevance is more about *the quality of humanness*, a mutual agreement between individuals of differing backgrounds and belief systems to not simply set aside dissimilarities and embrace those differences to appreciate them. This would be true for racial difference, religious division, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and generational gaps.

For an educator to bridge this divide, he or she must “make sense of their cross-cultural experiences in meaningful ways” (Schlein & Garii, 2011, p. 82). Culturally relevant teaching would reflect on the discreteness of the cultural experience (Schutz, 1932/1967). Whether this experience occurs as a stranger in a strange land or in the face-to-face interactions within a secondary classroom, the experience must be given an intentional meaning for it to have purpose and make an impact. Therefore, perhaps the most critical concern of cultural relevance is not a quantifiable increase in test scores. What can be established with a significant degree of certainty is the importance of validating the student’s personal identity and making a conscious effort to connect with a student as a fellow human being. This is true for every child in a school setting.

Whether charged with educating a student from another geopolitical region or a citizen of another race or socioeconomic status, we as educators must remember we too are analogous to Schutz’s (1944) notion of *stranger*. Teachers cannot take for granted the child’s ability to adeptly or adequately grasp and interpret the cultural patterns of the dominant group. The child as a newcomer will need a cultural advocate to help him or her navigate the alien social setting.

Fundamentally, then, a culturally relevant pedagogy would imply programs that are at their most base level relevant programs based on relationships, on equity and empathy. In this, a culturally relevant educator is an advocate for social justice, instructing and *safeguarding*—safeguarding their human rights and respecting their individual identities. At the bedrock of such a pedagogical approach is the undeniably ethical affair of justice, care, and critique (Starratt, 1991, 2004). Justice embraces an educational fairness in the way students are perceived and treated, how their rights are preserved, and the manner in which they are protected from bias and prejudice. Care includes an authentic compassion and concern for the education of children, regardless of their race, religious worldviews, socioeconomic status, cultural identity, country of origin, or customs of upbringing. Essentially, critique recognizes the potential of human interaction to develop asymmetrical relations over time. It is within the person of the educational leader wherein lies the capability to restructure organizational cultures and school climates to ensure democratic spaces to offset such inequities.

## **Lived Experience #2: The Elementary Principal**

Three years after leaving the newcomer program, I was appointed principal of South East Elementary. South East is rated by the as a Recognized campus with a Gold Performance Acknowledgement of Comparable Improvement in Mathematics for two consecutive years. At the moment we are the lowest performing campus in the district as well as the most culturally diverse, both ethnically and economically. The campus’s 690 student enrollment consists of 23% African American, 38% Hispanic, 37% White, almost 2% are Native American, and just

under 1% is Asian. Over the last three years the economically disadvantaged percentages have jumped from 68% in 2007-08 to 70% in 2008-09 to the 77% when I become principal in 2009-2010. Before I leave my post as instructional leader the lower socio-economic status will leap to 80% of the student population.

In 2009-2010 Hispanic students make up 38% of the student enrollment and 27% of all students are considered limited English proficient. Under the leadership of the new superintendent and new bilingual director the district has decided to implement one-way dual language models on the three campuses—North West, South West, and South East—that have up to this time only had sheltered English programs. The one-way dual language model, like the two-way enrichment program, teaches students in pre-k in their native language of Spanish; kinder through first grade are taught reading, social studies, science in Spanish, and mathematics in English. Again, this model is founded on a modified version of the Gomez-Gomez (1999, 2000) 50/50 dual language enrichment program. Second grade to fourth grade students are instructed in Spanish for all of science and social studies and for 50% of reading/language arts; they are given instruction in English for mathematics and the other half of reading/language arts.

South East Elementary is also the home campus to 150-plus African American students that make up 22.5% of the student numbers. The year before my arrival as building principal only 38% of the African American fourth graders had passed the state reading exam. Under my instructional leadership our African American students continue to struggle.

As a first-year administrator, I evaluate the programmatic aspects of the campus, researching what works for campuses with split socioeconomic populations and culturally diverse demographics. I talk to fellow principals in the district, and each of them is supportive and says they are aware of the unique problems of my campus, but each has his or her own concerns and fires to put out. Numerous times I met with teachers to find out what has worked in the past and what has not. I spent hours each day in the hallways greeting and talking with all students, asking them what they are learning and what they think about school here. I communicate the importance of consistency and connection to faculty and staff.

I am constantly looking for ways to connect. I welcome kids to school; I learn names; I give high fives in the hall; I ask questions about their day and what they are learning. Each day when I visit with students with discipline concerns, talking to them about consequences in the life and trying to delve into the antecedents of their acting out behavior. Being a building principal in many ways diminishes the intimacy of a classroom. However, I feel that I am still building a rapport with my students. Yet, based on district benchmarking data, our minority students continue to miss the mark.

My theories on why this is are many. During my first year on campus, I convinced myself that the students who need to be on task most in the classroom are the ones most likely to be disengaged by the paper-and-pencil activities and worksheet-based assessments that seem to be so common. My focus is turned on two endeavors that I initially believed had the potential to be culturally relevant programs. The first is the one-way dual language program. The second is an educational philosophy that will later come to be called the applied learning community.

**A one-way dual language program.** When I took the helm at South East Elementary, the school board has just approved a district-wide initiative to create bilingual programs on all four elementary campuses. Under the guidance of the district's bilingual coordinator, we each adopted a one-way dual language program. Collier and Thomas (2004) define one-way dual language programs as “demographic contexts where only one language group is being schooled through their two languages” (p. 2). Due to its roots in the two-way version, I am philosophically a strong proponent of this program, believing that it can offer all students opportunities of comprehensible input and potentially validate the students' home language

and cultural heritage. However, not everyone sees the possible benefits. As it is often with change there is much resistance.

The first phase of resistance I face comes from the teachers. There is an unwillingness of White Anglo teachers. Many teachers state that it is difficult to fully accept the dual language model for fear the students would “not adequately acquire English fast enough.” Others are most forthright, stating their resentment stems from fellow long-term and loyal teachers being displaced due to the recruitment of Hispanic bilingual teachers from other countries.

The second phase of resistance originates with the non-English speaking parents of the students in the program. Parents of children in the one-way immersion program feel that their child receiving 50% of their instruction in Spanish will delay their children’s acquisition of English. They need their children to learn English, for many reasons. They want their children to be successful in America. They fear their children will be persecuted for not knowing English. And most importantly, they need their children to learn English as quickly as possible in order to aid them in the affairs of daily living in the United States. In short, they need interpreters. Often their English-speaking children are all they have to help navigate the world in which they live.

I spend a great deal of time trying to convince both teachers and parents of the benefits of dual language learning. Being fluent in both English and Spanish has its advantages, I tell parents. We do not simply teach English, I tell teachers. We have to teach concepts and skills; we are accountable for teaching not simply the words on the page but also the concepts of reading, not merely the numbers but the relationships of all aspects mathematical. Science and social studies must be presented in a manner that ensures every child comprehends the necessary foundations for college, career, and life-long learning. That a child cannot yet speak English proficiently is not an excuse to fail in this task; we must teach the concepts of reading, language arts, science, and the respective grade-level social studies in ways that young non-English speaking children can understand them, and meanwhile, also ensure that they each acquire proficient English skills. By recruiting bilingual teachers that are native language speakers and also understand the cultural nuances of children from Latin America, we are doing what we can to make sure every child has the opportunity to learn the mandated knowledge and skills.

Difficulty in recruiting and retaining a bilingual teaching staff is another obstacle. In Year 1, I have a pre-kindergarten teacher from Mexico, a kindergarten teacher from Mexico, a first-grade teacher from Argentina, and a second-grade teacher from Mexico. In third and fourth grade, we did not have a bilingual program, only ESL classes. In Year 2, the previous pre-kindergarten left to work across town in the two-way immersion program on a campus with her husband; I hired a first-year bilingual Anglo teacher to replace her. I was able to retain the kindergarten teacher from Mexico, the 1st grade teacher from Argentina, and the second grade teacher from Mexico. This year I added a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher who is Mexican American and has worked South East for several years as a teacher’s aide. Year 3 will see additional changes and shifts.

The Spanish-speaking parents prefer Anglo teachers. They believe that by having a teacher that they perceive as American will accelerate their children’s acquisition of English. These same parents are extremely resistant to accept the teacher from Argentina. Although from a pedagogical standpoint she is a very proficient educator, they complain that she is difficult to understand, that she does not communicate effectively, that she is not fair in the way that she handles classroom discipline, and even one parent says that she cannot talk to her. The parent’s reason is that she does not like the teacher’s accent or the way she speaks Spanish.

Another distraction to the effectiveness of the bilingual program is the new focus on the new brain-based, projects-based learning classes, or the Applied Learning Community (as

it will come to be called). The “Anglo-centric” push for the Applied learning community will take precedence over resourcing any of the multicultural programs in the program.

**An applied learning center.** During the summer of my final year as principal at South East, I sat down with the assistant principal and began to discuss the complaints that we had heard from many of our parents. These protests include concerns that we only “teach to the test,” that “my child only does TAKS-packets and worksheets all day,” and that “my child is not being challenged.” We also hear that certain parents did not like having their children in classrooms “with *those* students.” Prominent citizens begin to bond together to push for “something different” for their children. I decide to focus on the concerns to challenge children by engaging them with something more meaningful than the so-called “TAKS-packets” and simple pencil-paper tasks.

My administrative staff and I envision a campus-wide model for converting our classrooms into engaging learning environments. We view the way we have always done things as ineffective and along with many of our teachers we see a need for change—a change that will capture the attention of the children we feel are being left behind, i.e. our African American and lower socio-economic students. We want to capitalize on creating digital modalities of instruction, creating multicultural student-centered environments, focusing on student learning styles and multiple intelligences, and varying our methods of assessment. Much like when I was a classroom teacher, this is not specifically intended to be a culturally relevant endeavor. Nevertheless, the schema does consider all students from all walks of life. The paradigm we envision aligns well with Brooks and Brooks (1993), Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009), Nieto (2010), and Darling-Hammond (2010). Making a constructivist, racially and culturally sensitive, and socially equitable program possible our ideal could potentially engage a campus of students that have thus far remained mostly disconnected.

Teachers are divided. There are those—including a strategist—who believe the answer is an even more intense standardized way of instruction, less flexibility, less risk-taking, more workbooks and multiple-choice assessment, extensive TAKS-based questioning, and teaching of only test-oriented vocabulary. In the other camp, there are those that are convinced that continuing with more of the same will only achieve more of the same results. These particular educators call for “an innovative, hands-on 21<sup>st</sup> century” model, perceiving change and diversity as a means to empower students. To engage the students’ pluralistic needs and diverse learning styles means designing digital and multicultural student-centered learning experiences. Of course, being a young administrative charged to bring about change, I lean to favor the latter.

Yet as the assistant principal and I are beginning to articulate this vision on our campus, the superintendent of schools announces that a new school within a school will be started at the beginning of the next school year at the North East Elementary campus, a Blue-Ribbon School. This program is to be “something different” and will complement the campus’s popular two-way bilingual program with “brain-based research, technology-based instruction, and project-based instruction” (as the local paper announces under the title “Every Student Learns Differently”). Two months later when local stakeholders pass a bond proposal to build new campuses for South East Elementary and North West Elementary, it is decided to move the program from North East to South East. The official statement is that since North East already has their well-accepted two-way dual language program that South East would be a better setting. The superintendent later reveals to the principals in a meeting that the parents in the district who are “the real push” behind the program would like to see at the South East campus where a new school is to be built. An article appears in the local paper covering the mindset behind the new venture. The photo that accompanies the article is a picture of my one-way bilingual kindergarten classrooms.

**Development of an elite learning community.** As we begin developing what will come to be called the South East Applied Learning Community several personal concerns begin to come to the forefront. My first concern is that it becomes immediately obvious that the new program is being strongly influenced by a group of more affluent, predominantly White-only community members. The superintendent and assistant superintendent of curriculum have already taken a group of these parents and a consultant they have selected to visit other brain-based campuses in Burleson and in Ft. Worth. Therefore, in my opinion the political impetus behind the program is by this time beginning to outweigh the pedagogical motives.

My second major concern is that the assistant principal—someone who shares my views regarding the program—is not allowed to participate in either the committee discussions or the interview process to hire the teachers for the learning community. When I asked the superintendent about allowing her to take part in the process, he told me that she needs to be available on the campus to take care of any concerns that arise. I wonder what concerns he means since each of our meetings occur after school hours. Instead, the strategist, a long-time teacher who openly does not share my views, is asked to serve on the committees.

My third concern is that I am not allowed to talk about this instructional paradigm as a campus-wide mindset. It is to be limited to two kindergarten and two first grade classrooms only. Forty-four students will be selected in kindergarten, and another 44 student slots in first grade will be all that is allowed to benefit from the initiative. If this first year is successful, two second grade classes will be added, then the next year two third grade, and so on.

The final concern is in the way things are prioritized. Discussion does not begin with the instructional design of the program. That, the committee members say, should be left until after we hire the teachers, and—from the focus of a democratic lens—I agree. We keep referring to the pending program as being founded on 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills. The superintendent tells me “no one really knows what a 21<sup>st</sup> century school looks like.” Instead our initial dialogues center on discussions about the application process, whether we should hold a lottery or not, whether we should screen students or not, and the hiring process for teachers. I quickly disagreed with the screening of students using any standardized assessment. Originally, my hope was to design a program that engaged previously unengaged students. My fear is that a screening process will eliminate disadvantaged students who need this the most. Everyone, including the superintendent, agrees in the meeting.

In the next meeting of the board of trustees, the assistant superintendent presents on the development of the program. The presentation covers the screening process for students, the application process for parents, and the hiring process for teachers. The screening of students for potential kindergarten students will be based on the success of students on the pre-kindergarten Center for Improving the Readiness of Children for Learning and Education (CIRCLE) assessment. For potential first grade students, entrance will be determined by a score of “developed” on the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) assessment. Parents interested in the program will be expected to attend one of three possible parent meetings and then will be expected to go online to access a web-based application. The application will be accepted no earlier than 8:30am on the designated Monday morning.

I was unaware of any of these stipulations. Each had been discussed in meetings, but the decisions to implement them had been decided elsewhere. I am concerned. In an industry-driven community such as mine the majority of our lower socioeconomic and minority parents have to be at their hourly wage jobs by 7:00am. In my mind, I am convinced that these hurdles are put in place to filter out “those children.” Highly frustrated, my concerns are transparent to many.

When I leave South East Elementary at the end of the 2010-2011 academic year, I am hoping to find a way to ensure that all children can learn. With no state exemptions allowed and no projectile measurement to predict virtual passers, our state rating drops from



Recognized to Academically Acceptable. Ninety-five percent of all Hispanic and White students in third grade will pass reading while our African American children in third will lag behind with only 67% passing. Mathematics results will demonstrate that 98% of White third graders are proficient with 88% Hispanic and the same 67% of African American students passing third grade math TAKS. In fourth grade reading 98% of White students, 89% of Hispanic and 73% of African American students will meet state standard. Eighty-eight percent of White fourth graders will score a met standard on the math TAKS, with African American students right behind, scoring 86% on the test; Hispanic students will outperform both other subgroups with 89% passing. In fourth grade writing >99% of African American students, 95% of White students, and 82% of Hispanic students will pass. These scores mean we will continue to be considered the lowest performing elementary campus in the district. With the drop in rating, the superintendent visits me and informs me that due to the “low scores on testing” that he will be considering a recommendation that the school board not take action to extend my contract next year.

### **Axiological Inquiry #2**

The second axiological question of this inquiry deals with whether or not the value of culturally relevant practices as informed by the scholar–practitioner educational leadership model holds a value beyond its empirical base in scholarship and research. Can scholar–practitioner school leaders as moral democratic agents develop the necessary literacy to produce and consume relevant inquiries and investigations into this phenomenon? At the surface the primary concern of the scholar–practitioner model places an emphasis on the relationships and tensions between the finite provinces of theory and practice. Culturally relevant school leadership as a scholarly practice can mean being a critically conscious leader who studies the theory–research relationship of multicultural consequence and then considers how these theories can inform his or her practice in regard to learners from diverse populations. As well, however, the scholar–practitioner also understands the role that practice has in shaping theory. Therefore, one must look within the field and within their own practiced spaces to observe the application of cultural relevance and then reflectively use that data to reform existing theories and inform the development of new theories.

The educational leadership model focuses on the way in which theory has the potential to inform practice, and the reciprocal manner in which practice informs theory. The opposition and overlap of theory and practice as finite provinces of meaning are important addressing the conflicts that arise in the unique sphere of education—that is, education is at times a theoretical venture concerned with pedagogical philosophies and research questions, and at other times it is a practical task driven by a particular pragmatic motive to perform pedagogy.

### **Conclusion**

The scholar–practitioner leader as a moral democratic agent of cultural relevance must learn to “read” the inequitable relationships that develop in school setting. Fundamentally, these are asymmetrical power struggles as culturally dominant interests vie against the cultural diversity that exist within a school community, often in the form of a marginalized or minoritized group such as a “newcomer” group. To consider this aspect of the study requires orienting the self to critically question the lop-sided interactions that manifest based on race, ethnicity, linguistic background, disability, or economic status. As Jenlink (2006) averred, “the culture and practiced place of the school is defined . . . by the critical orientation” (p. 58). Being critically oriented implies that I, as an educational leader, reflectively consider my culturally

relevant actions and attempt to make meaning of those actions or at least present them here in a manner in which others may make meaning of them.

The unspoken and underlying interests of stakeholders involved include students, parents, community members, legislators and lobbyists, state and federal agencies, school boards, district superintendents, central office administrators, campus principals, and classroom teachers. These interests and voices represented conflict. They converged and competed for attention in the activity of schooling, creating a number of natural sociopolitical tensions. Inequities and asymmetrical relationships naturally grow out of the competition for political power. Therefore, it becomes necessary as a critically oriented educational leader and educator to contemplate the inequities and biases, and to consider the several power struggles that develop from a moral standpoint, applying ethical sensitivity to dilemmas faced when making decisions. Due to demographics of the region where I practiced many of the social injustices that manifested were not only racial and economic, but also religious and linguistic. An educational leader, this required me to step outside of my own moral value systems and learn to read, or rather decode, the systems that others brought to the table. It demanded that I set myself aside for the wellbeing of students from backgrounds with customs that I did not always fully comprehend. As Esposito and Swain (2009) avowed, “Culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice pedagogy both aim to combat negative messages by instilling in students cultural pride and critical consciousness” (p. 46).

As a result, social justice and cultural relevance frequently became paired through theoretical thought and practical action. I discovered a need to prioritize frameworks that would foster climates conducive to an ethic of care and acceptance, and a need to influence district policies and campus procedure that would encourage and create expectations on cultural sensitivity and cultural responsiveness. I was not always successful with this. Sometimes this was due to my own lack of attention to sensitive issues but also it was a lack of skill in navigating the political waters of educational leadership hierarchies. As seen from the lived experiences presented in these vignettes, no form of cultural relevance can exist without the political capital to support it. If an existing top-down environment was not conducive to such growth, it could easily stifle my novice attempts too quickly. If board members were not conscious of the needs of their diverse constituency and if superintendents and fellow principals continued to make decisions and to enact policy that favored elitists, it could hinder efforts toward fostering a mentality of cultural relevance.

Culturally relevant leadership would most likely flourish in a democratic climate of diverse dialogue and constructive conflict. As a culturally relevant school leader, in my classroom and on my campus, I had to model decision-making that considered all student and stakeholder positions, circumstances, and mores. Finally, in a setting that continues to diversify the leader must remain reflective and reflexive of her or his administrative actions and behaviors. To be culturally relevant does not mean every decision made or every dilemma faced will be the ideal for every single stakeholder; however, it does mean that it was approached and enacted with sensitivity for the various cultures impacted and with deliberation to make meaning of the circumstances.

Schutz (1932/1967) posited that when we consider our lived experiences, we see them in a singular manner. In his words,

[A]s I look back upon my elapsed experience, I see it monothetically, even though it has come into existence in phases and through many intentional Acts. The total content of all my experience . . . is, then, brought together and coordinated in the total context of my experience. (pp. 76-77)

This singular, unexamined reflection of the past manifests metaphorically in Eliot's line of poetry which functions as the epigraph of this inquiry. Schutz (1932/1967) added that the meaningful context of our experiences occurs "with every new lived experience" (p. 77). Only by reflecting upon them critically, considering the importance of their context and content, can an act of meaning truly take shape.

By doing so, one is able to give meaning—an immeasurable meaning—to phenomena such as the scholarly practice of culturally relevant leadership. In examining this meaning and offering others the opportunity to expand on its implications, educators and school leaders can begin to work toward a moral practice that is responsive, relevant, and proficient to all cultures.

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