

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS AND STUDENTS LIVING IN  
POVERTY: TEACHER UNDERSTANDING AND PEDAGOGY

By

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the level of cultural proficiency and culturally responsive pedagogy of elementary school teachers who teach in schools that are predominantly White and have a majority of students who receive free and reduced lunch. Using Lindsey, Robert, & CampbellJones' theoretical framework of Cultural Proficiency and Irvine and Armento's framework of Culturally Responsive Strategies, this study explored whether the teachers' attitudes and practices were indicative of cultural proficiency or whether they were indicative of cultural destructiveness, culturally incapacity, or cultural blindness.

This qualitative study used a modified approach to Seidman's three interview process. Twelve elementary teachers from three different schools were interviewed two times. The first interview focused on teachers' life histories. The second interview focused on the broad question, "What do elementary teachers working in predominantly White low-income communities say about their work?"

The findings from this study suggest that teachers working in predominantly low-income non-minority communities view their varied life experiences as assets in their

work. This study also draws attention to the positive and negative roles of the teachers' learned values. The values teachers learned in their childhood impact how they teach low SES non-minorities. Teachers in this study had received little or no training on poverty and its impact on schools.

In addition, this study highlights the differences between culturally unskilled teachers and culturally adept teachers. Skill levels in cultural proficiency determined whether teachers were described as culturally unskilled or culturally adept. Culturally unskilled teachers neglected demographics or viewed them as a challenge. They used stereotypes to describe their students living in poverty. Culturally unskilled teachers' built classrooms based on a tolerance for diversity.

Culturally adept teachers used demographics to inform their practice. They esteemed the diversity in their classrooms as well as leveraged low SES students' strengths. These teachers created classrooms different from classrooms based on tolerance. Their classrooms were transforming towards equity. Culturally adept teachers used five essential culturally responsive strategies in their classrooms. These teachers built positive relationships, developed personal meaning for students, promoted individual empowerment, set high expectations, and created learning communities.

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## **Dedication**

For my mother, Joyce Mae Sladek McSheehy, 1933-1984.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Our goals, how we teach, what we teach, how we relate to children and each other are rooted in the norms of our culture. Our society's predominant worldview and cultural norms are so deeply ingrained in how we educate children that we seldom think about the possibility that there may be other different but equally legitimate and effective approaches to teaching and learning. In a society with as much sociocultural and racial diversity as the United States, the lack of this wonderment about alternative ways often results in unequal education and social injustice (Pai, 1990, p. 229).

When we pass by an elementary school in a low-income neighborhood and look into a classroom, who do we see sitting in the desks? Who do we see teaching at the front of the classroom? A number of these classrooms will have what we observe to be a mostly heterogeneous population in terms of racial diversity, ethnic diversity, or immigration status. However, several classrooms exist in poor neighborhoods that may not appear to be diverse in any of the above readily identifiable contexts. These classrooms are regularly perceived to be homogeneous; meaning the students and the teachers are mostly White. Nevertheless, closer examination of these classrooms will reveal another culturally diverse and often overlooked group of students, the White students living in poverty.

Schools in the United States continue to enroll increasing numbers of students from diverse cultures, particularly low SES (Socioeconomic Status) students. With this growth, the cultural discontinuities between these heterogeneous student populations and homogenous teaching populations also increases (Phuntsog, 1999). Elementary education cannot escape the effects of this growth and the accompanying class inequities that exist in today's cities and schools. Many teachers and administrators in schools have a limited awareness of how their class, gender, and race positions impact their work. They do not see how their views about other's class, gender, and race positions help to reproduce the social hierarchy. These limited or uneducated views may also contribute to the achievement gap that exists between students living in poverty and their non-minority middle-class counterparts. It is important to study these views and ask whether teachers are able to increase awareness of their own class, gender, and race positions and reflect how these positions impact their teaching. If explored further, can these views be altered? Perhaps a heightened level of awareness will lead to a more culturally proficient teacher and stronger relationships between the teacher, their students, and the school community.

The majority of teachers in general as well as elementary school teachers are White, middle-class, monolingual women (Nieto, 2003, Swanson-Gehrke, 2005). In 1999 12.8% of teachers were of color, and 87.3% were White (Edgar, Patton, & Day-Vines, 2002). Most teachers attend college less than one hundred miles from home; a factor that often isolates teachers from diverse cultures (Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). Studies by Dilworth (1992) and Goodlad (1990) found that most teacher candidates will have grown up with little knowledge about or genuine contact with others of different social class, racial, or religious backgrounds. In large urban areas minority students comprise the

majority population in public schools, and today's teachers are far more likely than their predecessors to teach children with backgrounds different than their own (Sleeter, 2001). In short, teachers and students generally live in geographically and existentially different worlds (Gay, 2000).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Given that elementary school teachers play a critical role in their student's lives and educational achievement, there is a need for teacher preparation programs and educational leadership programs to increase the capacity of educators to be successful with a wider range of students. There are wild and rapid demographic changes among students and their families that are face to face with the increasing cultural and ethnic homogeneity of teachers and school administrators. It is evident that the lack of cultural synchronization existing between student, their families, their families and schools is potentially much greater today than at any time in our nation's history.

When examining their own classrooms, what are the effects of teachers who may be culturally blind when looking at their White students from impoverished families? Do teachers only view poverty in terms that are negative and embedded with stereotypes? Do teachers blame low-income students and families for poor academic outcomes? These are all symptoms of teachers who merely tolerate the diversity in their classroom and lack skills in cultural proficiency.

Are teachers willing to focus on their practices and adapt their teaching rather than focus on the how the students and their families need to change? If teachers remain a part of the dominant culture, cultural proficiency will be warranted to help understand



any group who does not belong to the dominant White majority, including the White disadvantaged. An outgrowth of this work is the desire to improve the educational outcomes of students who live in poverty who have not been as successful as their White middle and upper-class counterparts despite their involvement in the educational system.

Due to the large number of schools that are enrolling increasing numbers of low socioeconomic status (SES) students and the resulting increase of cultural diversity, there exists a need for educators to overcome ethnocentrism and cultural hegemony, and to integrate students' cultural beliefs into their classroom practices. As a result, it is imperative that teachers increase their cultural proficiency. This process would lead teachers in surfacing, examining, and challenging the validity of their own beliefs, assumptions, and actions, and becoming responsive to increasing their level of student advocacy. In addition, this process would lead teachers to examine their current instructional practices and how they implement a more culturally responsive pedagogy when teaching low SES students.

The world of work awaiting today's students will be ethnically and culturally diverse. The ability to understand and interact with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds will be an invaluable skill in the workplace. Technology has made the marketplace global, and the changing demographic picture in America means that everyone will likely have opportunities to interact with people who come from diverse populations. Increasing the number of teachers from disadvantaged backgrounds may give students school-based role models with whom to identify or from whom to learn; however, there is no guarantee that teachers from disadvantaged backgrounds will be any more culturally proficient than their middle-class peers.

Teacher induction programs as well as educational leadership programs are increasingly trying to teach culturally sensitive pedagogy (Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2005). There is also a need for professional development to help new and experienced teachers and administrators become culturally proficient. Even with more recent attention to cultural diversity, there is far to go before all new educators have received adequate preparation.

Can teachers who are not actively seeking to become culturally proficient design lessons to engage the diverse student populations they teach? Can administrators modify their school's curriculum and instructional practices to meet the challenges and develop the assets that ethnically and culturally diverse students bring to school if they do not understand their students' cultures? An examination of current student achievement indicators says no. Non-minority children who are also low-income students continue to lag behind their middle-class peers on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments, the American College Test (ACT), and the Standardized Achievement Test (SAT) performance.

What are the competencies and skills that all educators must have to become effective in a culturally diverse society, and how can these competencies be developed? Although there may be no definitive answer to this fundamental question, just as there is no one best teaching model, there is a professional area of knowledge that permeates all educational programs, cultural proficiency. Do teachers and administrators reflect the experiences and voices of all of society in their classrooms or merely those of the dominant society?

Educators must be prepared for cultural proficiency and culturally responsive teaching as well as understanding the economic, social, and political factors that maintain cultural competencies (Rushton, 2000). King and Ladson-Billings (1990) have described their attempts to help students consider cultural competencies and critical perspectives “as a continuum that begins with self-awareness and knowledge that extends to thinking critically about society and making a commitment to transformative teaching” (p. 26). It is essential to develop a process where educators have an opportunity to step outside themselves and identify how their cultural assumptions and beliefs affect what they conclude about their student’s abilities. This type of process would promote cultural proficiency and culturally responsive teaching through the surfacing unspoken rules and biases. This type of process would also promote schools that are based upon equity for all students and not just the dominant middle class.

### **Purpose of this Study**

Due to the homogeneity of the teaching force and the increasing diversity of the student population, the purpose of this study is to gain insight into the level of cultural proficiency and culturally responsive pedagogy of fully licensed elementary school teachers who teach in schools that are predominantly White and have a majority of students who are receiving free and reduced lunch. This study specifically addresses several questions. What do elementary teachers working in predominantly White low-income communities say about their work, and can this data be used to examine their cultural proficiency and ability to engage in culturally responsive pedagogy? Furthermore, are teachers neglecting the diversity, specifically low SES non-minority

students, in their classrooms or are they using demographics and what they know about students to inform and change their practices? In effect, transforming their classrooms into classrooms based upon awareness and equity.

Understanding how to recognize and assess cultural proficiency will enable teacher and administrator preparation institutions to better prepare educators to work with richly diverse students in schools that are predominantly White and low-income. For this research, students from low-income families or low socioeconomic status (SES) are defined by the Title 1 criteria of percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch.

Connected to this goal of improving outcomes for all students are increased efforts to recruit and retain a diverse teaching force in elementary education. But, if most teachers continue to be White, middle-class, monolingual and females (Nieto, 2003) then our task of preparing highly qualified teachers ought to have an emphasis in additional areas, cultural proficiency and culturally responsive teaching. We are obligated to focus on increasing the cultural proficiency of our macro-culture teaching force as well as our educational leaders.

The intent of this study is to interview elementary teachers at length to hear what they have to say about class issues and their work in elementary education. How do elementary teachers' cultural, ethnic, and class status shape educational beliefs, pedagogy, and practices? To what extent do teachers understand or have access to knowledge about diverse characteristics of students and their impact on learning? Is what they say more indicative of the more traditional viewpoint of tolerance for diversity or of a more progressive personal transformation for equity?

This study further advances research in the field because it not only examines the teachers' practices and ideas, but also indicates whether practicing, fully licensed elementary teachers are culturally proficient and use culturally responsive teaching. In this study a better understanding of how to assess teacher's level of cultural proficiency and cultural responsive pedagogy is sought.

For this research, cultural proficiency is defined generally as the ability of teachers to respond optimally to all children, understanding both the richness, and the limitations reflected by their own socio-cultural contexts, as well the socio-cultural context of the students they are teaching. There is a relationship between educators' level of cultural proficiency and whether they approach cultures from a perspective of tolerance or equity. If teachers and leaders are more culturally proficient, the more likely they are working to create classrooms based upon principles of equity.

Tolerance for diversity exists when educators view demographics of different cultures as a challenge or neglect them altogether. Students and families from these cultures are expected to assimilate and acculturate into the dominant culture. School administrators, when addressing diversity in their schools, merely contribute or add to existing policies, procedures and practices. The focus or onus for success in school is placed mainly upon the students and families (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbelljones, 2005).

Teachers and leaders who are moving from the conventional perspective of tolerance for diversity to transformation for equity use demographics to inform policy and practice. Diversity is esteemed, strengths are leveraged to deal with conflict, and accountability for continuous improvement is placed squarely on the teachers and school

leaders. The focus is on teacher's and school's practices (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbelljones, 2005).

Research from this study will add to the increasing scholarship on culturally responsive pedagogy for elementary teachers and public schools. Seidman (2006) states, "so much research is done on schooling in the United States; yet so little of it is based on studies involving the perspective of students, teachers, administrators... whose individual and collective experience constitutes schooling." This study will further the amount of research needed to examine and solve the complex issues in how universities prepare pre-service teachers and school administrators to work in schools that prepare students for a pluralistic society.

In order to reduce persistent problems in the field of education, we turn to the adults who serve students in low-income families. It is necessary that macro-culture educators be culturally proficient and use culturally responsive pedagogy. In this study, the concepts of cultural proficiency versus culturally responsive pedagogy and tolerance for diversity versus transformation for equity, which typically relate to race and ethnicity, will be focused on social class.

### **Poverty and Education**

What role does poverty play in education? As part of Presidential Johnson's War on Poverty, the Head Start Program was established in 1965 to increase the readiness for school of low-income children from birth to age five. That same year, Title 1, the first section of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, allowed for the provision of funds to schools with large numbers of low-income students. This being said, inadequate

institutional capacity continually vexes Title 1 (McDonnell, 2005). America's continually limited response to issues surrounding poverty and education can best be characterized as lackluster (Berliner 2005, Biddle, 2001, Brandlinger, 2003, Kozol 1992). One difficulty Americans face is attempting to separate problems associated with poverty and problems associated with race or ethnicity. There has been a long tradition of ameliorating the discrimination against such groups that have been defined in terms of race, ethnicity, or immigration status (Biddle, 2001). In contrast, believing the United States to be the richest country, Americans have a difficult time thinking or talking about poverty. Laws are rarely debated about discrimination against impoverished persons and these persons are rarely thought of as a minority group (Biddle, 2001). Because of high correlations between students in poverty and students of color, there has been little evidence of controlling for minorities in studies of poverty and its effects on education.

According to several studies, one out of every five children is likely to experience problems associated with poverty (Biddle 2001, Berliner, 2005). Several relationships emerge from this high rate of poverty amongst children in the United States and their educational experiences. Wood (2003) made the association that students who are living in poverty are more likely to be retained, suspended, and expelled from school. Students living in poverty are also more likely to exhibit feelings of inadequacy stemming from the stress of not having the arriving on time for school, having the right clothes, or completing homework projects (Beegle, 2003, Beegle, 2007). In addition, parent school relationships are considerably weaker amongst families living in poverty and schools when compared to families of the middle-class. Working class families receive generic

educational experiences while middle class families receive more individualized experiences (Lareau, 2000).

In the past, people have relied upon educational systems to level the playing field and offer equal opportunities for success to every student regardless of their family's income level. Kozol (2005) believes we are in a state of crisis when we play "musical chairs with children's lives, when the half of the chairs are broken and the best chairs are reserved for people of his race and class" (p. 127). However, Berliner (2005) believes that we must first look at our communities and ways to improve quality of life for the impoverished such as raising the minimum wage, demanding universal medical coverage for all children, offering low cost housing, and demanding woman's wages be set equal to those of men doing comparable work, since it is working woman and their children who make a large percentage of America's poor. The American educational system is geared to give the best chances to those who are already in a privileged position (Brandlinger, 2003). Taylor, Dearing & McCartney's (2004) study on the effects of traditional head start program and simple growth in family income on children's cognitive and affective behavior leads us to speculate about income change and school success. What would happen if we just increased the incomes for the poor as well as improved school readiness?

Change in income can help increase student achievement however any significant change in income for a community is not easily realized. Thus, America's schools remain in the spotlight in terms of continuing the fight that President Johnson started. Coleman (1988) also pointed out that schools can impact students, given enough resources and appropriate programs. These resources and programs may supply impoverished students



with social and cultural capital that isn't provided to them in their homes in order for them to make it (Biddle, 2001). Tough (2006) posits that concentrating on the academic disadvantages of poor people may go so far as to ameliorate the achievement gap that exists between black and White students. Simple measures such as offering more time, approaching teaching as a science and not an art, and teaching character are what he calls a simple algorithm, "give a student X and you will get Y (high student achievement)" (Tough, 2006).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2005), real median household income remained unchanged between 2003 and 2004 at \$44,389. Meanwhile, the nation's official poverty rate rose from 12.5 percent in 2003 to 12.7 percent in 2004. The poorest state was Mississippi, with a 22 percent poverty rate. New Hampshire and Vermont had the lowest poverty rates, at 5.1 and 7.2 percent respectively. Washington stands at 8 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). The percentage of the nation's population without health insurance coverage remained stable, at 15.7 percent in 2004. The number of people with health insurance increased by 2.0 million to 245.3 million between 2003 and 2004, and the number without such coverage rose by 800,000 to 45.8 million. At this time, there are no indicators that poverty is going away.

Performance outcomes of social classes have been measured repeatedly on national standardized tests as well as state graduation rates. The difference between the performance of poor and non-poor 4th graders nationwide on the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math test is noted below in Table 1. The tests are measured three different ways: percent proficient, percent basic, and average scale score.

Table 1  
*Performance of SES Groups on 2007 NAEP Fourth Grade Math Test*

	<b>Percent Proficient</b>	<b>Percent Basic</b>	<b>Average Scale Score</b>
Non-poor	<b>53</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>249</b>
Poor	<b>22</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>227</b>
Discrepancy	<b>-31</b>	<b>-21</b>	<b>-22</b>

Note: Data posted in The Quick and the Ed by Educationsector.

The percentage of poor students deemed basic was more than 20% lower than the non-poor students and over 30% lower in the category of proficient. The discrepancy is hardly unnoticeable. From these results, it is obvious that students from low-income families do not have the same basic skills as their non-poor peers.

The Standardized Achievement Test (SAT) given to high school juniors and seniors is one of the tools colleges and universities use to examine the probability of success in college of incoming freshman. The dominant culture has institutionalized the SAT based on a system of meritocracy, meaning if you study hard and take the best test prep course, you can score high enough on the test to get into the best schools. The test is one of the many hurdles that students of poverty face when climbing out from under the constraints of their income level. Table 2 shows the relationship between average income and average score on the SAT. As the level of family income increases, the median score on the SAT increases.

Table 2

*Average Combined SAT Scores by Income (400 to 1600 scale)*

<b>Family Income</b>	<b>Median Score</b>
More than \$100,000	1130
\$80,000 to \$100,000	1082
\$70,000 to \$80,000	1058
\$60,000 to \$70,000	1043
\$50,000 to \$60,000	1030
\$40,000 to \$50,000	1011
\$30,000 to \$40,000	986
\$20,000 to \$30,000	954
\$10,000 to \$20,000	907
less than \$10,000	871

Note: These figures are based on the test results of 1,302,903 SAT takers in 1999.  
 Source: Race, Class, and Gender in the United States (p.176) by Paula S. Rothenberg, 2001. New York: Worth Publishers.

When examining the Washington State class of 2004 on-time graduation rates the graduation rate for low SES (socio-economic status) students was 62.3% (OSPI, 2005). The state’s average on-time graduation rate for all students in the class of 2004 was 70.1% (OSPI, 2005). This discrepancy indicates that students from low-income families are 8% less likely to graduate compared to their non-poor peers. These critical statistics have alerted the state to focus on how teachers understand and address the needs of kids from low-income families. Unless this trend is reversed, Washington State will continue to graduate less than 65 out of every 100 low-income kids from high school.

Definitions of poverty in the United States vary from researcher to researcher. For this research, the proxy used for students living in poverty is students who qualify for the national free and reduced lunch program. Students meet the criteria for low socioeconomic status (low SES) or low-income if they qualify for free or reduced lunch according to standards set by the National School Lunch Program/School Breakfast Program. The following is an example from the income eligibility guidelines for the program: a student qualifies if he/she belongs in a household of two people and the gross

income is no more than \$23,736.00. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) uses this data to determine the rates of low SES for the state, districts, and individual schools.

### **Cultural Reproduction and the Home School Relationship**

School, as a microcosm of society, plays a pivotal role in maintaining societal structures and transmitting culture and status (Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J., 1990). In the United States, schooling is the vehicle that is supposed to provide equal opportunity for all. But, in reality, it reproduces the very social class hierarchies it strives to eliminate.

Elementary education is impacted by class inequities that exist in society at large. Many teachers and other professionals in schools aren't aware of how their class, gender, and race positions impact their work. They do not see how their views about other's class, gender, and race positions help to reproduce the social hierarchy. Some students and parents who are from poverty are not aware or do not question this cultural reproduction or the poor educational results that they attain. They often believe that if they fail, it is their own fault (McLaren, 1998).

Furthermore, many teachers don't disagree with or question this line of thinking. For the most part, they are not aware of the role they play in supporting and maintaining society's dominant or macro-culture structures. This unexamined tolerance and membership in the dominant society's structure and processes is called hegemony. McLaren (1998) defines hegemony, "Hegemony refers to the maintenance of domination not by the sheer exercise of force but primarily through consensual social practices, social

forms, and social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school, the mass media, the political system, and the family” (p. 177).

Through educational practices social advantage is bestowed upon or maintained for select groups of students. The social advantage that teachers unwittingly pass on to macro-culture students is called cultural capital. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) say there are “processes which tend, behind the backs of the agents engaged in the social system – teachers, students, and their parents – and often against their will, to ensure the transmission of cultural capital across generations and to stamp pre-existing differences in inherited cultural capital.” They also state that, in reality, “school helps to make and impose the legitimate exclusions and inclusions which form the basis of social order” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990. p x).

Lareau (2000) Americanizes Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital when she contrasts working class families with middle class families and their distinct relationships with schools. Different classes transmit cultural capital differently to their children. The transmission of this capital from parents to kids is a very active process. Parents invest this capital to help their kids with achievement. Middle-class parent’s actions differ greatly from the working-class. Parents, in middle class families, have a different set of social resources than parents from working class families. The middle class families invest these social resources yielding social profits that aid their children over time in public schools (Lareau, 2000). Ellen Brantlinger (2003), says, “The educated middle class, who are primarily in control of schooling whether conscious or not, consistently arrange school structures to benefit children of their class” (p. 188). Essentially, Students and families living in poverty are thrown under the bus of meritocracy. Could these

theories of how cultural capital is transmitted in the home-school relationship be applied to the teacher-student relationship?

Rist's (1970) study shows how teachers from White middle class connect well to families and their students who shared the same values such as coming from intact homes where the parents are educated and having a neat and clean appearance. Rist (1970) goes on further to say, "The teacher ascribed high status to a certain group of children within the class who fit her perception of the criteria necessary to be among the "fast learners" (p. 423). This organization of students into categories became the basis for differential treatment to the detriment of the low-income students. Rist (1970) and Hart-Risley (cited in Tough, 2006) also looked at patterns of speech and how low-income students are spoken to differently in school and at home. Hart-Risley (2006) classified patterns of speech into encouragements and discouragements while Rist (1970) categorized teacher speech into verbal supportive, verbal neutral, verbal control. Each of these speech patterns qualified how students were treated differently according to their class status.

Social Capital, a concept related to cultural capital, provides a similar explanation for disparities in educational outcomes. It accrues from membership in social networks that provide valuable information and resources to students. Relationships between the school and families differ among the social classes (Hauser-Cram, Sirin, & Stipek, 2003, Lareau, 2000). Students from middle-income families are more often than not able to access someone who works in a school or knows someone who works in a school in order to access information. This informs decisions that range from accessing special educational services to resources for college applications. At each stage of a children's school experience, children's access to the next step may be limited or enhanced by their

class position because middle-class parents and working-class parents interact differently with the schools. Relations between working class and the school are characterized by separation (Lareau, 2000). Working-class families view schooling similar to work, something that took place between 8-5, teachers think differently “education as work.” Education becomes the responsibility of school, and not the home, leaving a large gap between schools and low-income families.

The people most involved in reproducing society’s social structure through educational practices are teachers. “It has been predicted that the teaching force will continue to be overwhelmingly White and female well into the future” (Hodgkinson, 1986, p. 15). Therefore, the development of cultural proficiency of all educators is paramount. Without it, the gaps in achievement between students from the dominant culture and poor students are likely to continue.

### **Teacher Perceptions and Expectations**

What impact do teachers have upon their low-income students? Research exists that speak about teachers and their ideas and cultures as and how these ideas relate to their expectations, relationships and how their values concerning education (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004, Hauser-Cram, Sirin, & Stipek, 2003, Lareau, 2000). Most of these studies frame the argument in terms of White teacher’s perceptions and expectations against students who are racially or ethnically different from them. When educators speak about culturally diverse, may we not also include social class as well and specifically separate race and ethnicity from social class?

Rist (1970) suggests that how teachers behave towards students from different social classes impacts their achievement in the classroom. Teacher expectations placed upon students in kindergarten shaped a student's entire educational future. This impact on low-income kids sets them in a track that impacts them until they leave school. Given how low-income students are treated in the early years at school, what class strata are they being prepared for other than the lower class? Furthermore, teacher expectations can also be influenced by the actions of parents (Hauser-Cram, Sirin, & Stipek, 2003, Lareau, 2000). The ultimate challenge for teacher educator programs is to prepare teachers with skills, attitudes, knowledge, and sensitivity to connect meaningfully with their students, thereby empowering the classroom students to succeed both academically and socially in a culturally complex world.

Recent literature suggests that many educational professionals are unable to see the ways in which their unconscious cultural perspectives shape and shade their own views of the teaching and learning process (Craig, Hull, Haggart, & Perez-Selles, 2000). From this perspective, educators tend to explain student's inability to benefit from instruction in terms of poor student motivation, disability, or lack of parental involvement. Biddle (2001) posits that this perspective may have emerged from an American ideology that stresses everyone can make it provided they have or can secure appropriate talents, work hard enough, and live within a country which provides a level playing field.

One other theory that is mostly outdated is the theory of Social Darwinism or that people inherit genetic "defects" which account for the laziness or lack of talent (Biddle, 2001). This theory of Social Darwinism may have been the genesis for what McKenzie &



Scheurich (2004) describe as one of the three equity traps that educators periodically fall into: deficit view, low expectations, and racial erasure. Thus, to effectively teach a diverse population of student, teachers need to examine their own classroom practices and reflect on the contradictions that may be influencing student's abilities to learn (Delpit, 1995, Beegle, 2003).

### **Culture of Power and White Privilege**

Culture is everything you believe and everything you do that enables you to identify with people who are like you and what distinguishes you from people who differ from you. Culture is about groupness. A culture is a group of people identified by their shared history, values, and patterns of behavior. The purpose of a culture is to assist people who are members of a group in knowing what the rules are for acceptable behavior and to provide consistency and predictability in everyday actions (Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell, 2003, p. 5).

Each school day these aspects of culture, consciously or subconsciously, affect how individuals within the school interact with one another to create cultural conflicts or to build cultural understanding (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003). Two final concepts that are heavily related to cultural dissonance are “the culture of power” and “White privilege.” Delpit (1995) states that the “culture of power” is “the codes or rules that relate to linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self; that is , ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing and ways of interacting. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power”

(pp. 24-25). This is specifically important given that the culture of power in most school systems reflects White, middle-class norms.

Peggy McIntosh (1988) has defined what she terms “White privilege,” or the experience of being White in America. McIntosh states,

I have come to see White privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks. Describing White privilege makes one newly accountable, so one who writes about having White privilege must ask, having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it (p. 4)?

The idea of White privilege is critical because it helps clarify why educators, the majority of whom are White and middle-class, may have trouble comprehending the challenges students from different cultures face on a day to day basis. For most White, middle-class educators, their social position, race and ethnicity, are unearned assets, not liabilities. Ladson-Billings (1994) states,

My own experiences with White teachers, both preservice and veteran, indicate that many are uncomfortable acknowledging any student differences and particularly racial differences. Thus some teachers make such statements as “I don’t really see color, I just see children.” However, these attempts at colorblindness mask a dysconscious racism and uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as

given... at the same time they are not unconscious of the ways in which some children are privileged and others are disadvantaged in the classroom (pp. 31-32).

The colorblindness that Ladson-Billings (1994) describes can also be extended to teachers and how they see students from low-income families. From a position of White privilege, are educators able to separate themselves from an uncritical habit of mind and differentiate their instruction according to the socioeconomic needs of their students? Can they examine their own beliefs and values, compare them to what is really happening in schools, and make meaning that impacts how they teach?

Trends in how we educate students clearly foretell that important changes are needed for this upcoming period in educational history, and the directions of change are evident. It is, however, less obvious how educators might go about altering long-standing assumptions, obtaining new knowledge about diverse students and learning, and developing new pedagogy based on these trends in teaching and learning.

### **Pilot Study**

This researcher conducted a smaller scale study of teacher understanding of low-income students during the Fall of 2006. Five elementary teachers were interviewed that worked in a school with a 45% population of low SES students and 17% population of minority students. The grade levels that the teachers taught varied from second grade to fifth grade. The experience level of the teachers ranged from teachers with two years experience to teachers with over fifteen years of experience. Each interview was approximately an hour in length. I took notes as well as audio-taped the interviews.

After transcribing the interviews, the data collected was analyzed for recurrent themes. The themes that emerged were: (a) teacher awareness, (b) cultural blindness, and (c) challenges working with low-income families. Findings from this study prompted this more intensive study of teacher levels of cultural proficiency and culturally responsive pedagogy.

## CHAPTER 2

### FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING

#### **Cultural Proficiency**

Listening... requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue (Delpit, 1995, p. 46).

Cultural proficiency encompasses the complex pattern of human behavior including thought, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, and values that respect all societies, not just the dominant culture represented. A culturally competent educator acknowledges and incorporates at all levels the importance of building cultural knowledge, valuing differences, self-assessment, and applying adapted practice (Cross, 1988). It is also important to note that cultural proficiency goes beyond multicultural education or education about diversity. Cultural proficiency includes awareness of power structures between dominant and sub-dominant cultures (Delpit, 1995).

Lindsey, Roberts, Campbell-Jones defined cultural proficiency as “knowing how to learn and teach about different groups in ways that acknowledge and honor all people and the groups they represent” (2005, p. 74). Teachers who are culturally proficient demonstrate attitude and behaviors that allow them to work in culturally diverse classrooms. The culturally proficient educator can name and claim their differences. They recognize difference as diversity rather than as inappropriate responses to the environment. Culturally proficient educators also acknowledge the legitimacy of how diverse populations interact and communicate (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). They use this information to enhance their instruction and their effectiveness communicating with students and families

To help understand cultural proficiency, Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell (2005) developed the following cultural proficiency continuum. This continuum describes the range of behaviors that may be present within schools.

1. Culturally destructiveness: negating , disparaging, or purging cultures that are different from your own.
2. Cultural incapacity: elevating the superiority of your own cultural values and beliefs and suppressing cultures that are different from your own.
3. Cultural blindness: acting as if differences among cultures do not exist and refusing to recognize any differences.
4. Cultural precompetence: recognizing that lack of knowledge, experience, and understanding of other cultures limits your ability to effectively interact with them.

5. Cultural competence: interacting with other cultural groups in ways that recognize and value their differences that motivate you to assess your own skills and expand your knowledge and resources and that, ultimately, cause you to adapt your relational behavior.
6. Cultural proficiency: honoring the differences among cultures and viewing diversity as a benefit, and interacting knowledgably and respectfully among a variety of cultural groups (p. 54).

Becoming a culturally proficient educator in the classroom is a developmental process. First, educators assess their present level of cultural competence and have a process for continually reassessing their cultural proficiency. As educators move across the continuum that ranges from little understanding and prejudice to cultural proficiency, the movement uses reflection and education to reconstruct educators' values and how they behave in the classroom. This reconstruction actively deconstructs learned values of the majority culture.

Listening to someone who is demonstrating cultural destructive attitudes or behaviors, one might hear such things as "this is America, everyone should speak English" or "this is reverse discrimination" indicating conflict and blame. At the other end of the continuum one might hear "I believe that conflict is natural and normal; I'm glad we are learning how to do things differently when conflict occurs" indicating empathy, learning, and advocacy. Attitudes and behaviors that are defined as culturally destructive, culturally incapable, and culturally blind are indicative of a tolerance for diversity perspective. Behaviors that are defined as culturally precompetent, culturally

competent, or culturally proficient are more indicative of the more progressive transformation for equity approach.

Moreover, culturally proficient teachers reject the deficit theory, acknowledge students' cultural heritages, and view them as assets. In Zeichner's article *Educating teachers to close the achievement gap: Issues of pedagogy, knowledge, and teacher preparation* (1996), he cautions that indiscriminate studies about cultures may lead to stereotypes, ignoring the fact that no two individuals from any one culture are exactly alike. How can teachers gain insight into their student's lives and learn about their student's culture? How can they progress toward cultural proficiency? Is it enough to read about other cultures in textbooks that they are assigned during their pre-service years? An alternative is to recognize that the students and their families are excellent resources from which to obtain this crucial information. They are the experts on their own culture and are the most authentic source for this type of data. There are several recommended strategies that teachers have at their disposal to conduct inquiry into student's lives. Educators can use home visits, conversations with community members, consultation with other teachers, observations of students in and out of school, or conversations with students as tools to learn about students and their cultures (Villegas, 1993). Teachers may find that their own culture and values are quite different from the students they teach. This cultural dissonance is not something to be ignored but can provide a bank of information from which educators draw upon to build relationships.

Because teachers and students come from different cultural backgrounds they often bring different cultural frames of reference and communication styles when they deliver instruction. Unfortunately, learning may not occur because the student may not be



able to form and display knowledge the way the teacher expects (Delpit, 1995).

McIntyre, Rosebery, & Gonzalez (2001) say, “Children from middle-class homes, where the funds of knowledge correspond nicely to those of school, experience much less discontinuity... Right from the start they know what to do and what to say in order to have their ideas heard and their activities valued by the teacher and the school” (pp. 3-4).

This cultural dissonance may appear to be too much to overcome. In spite of this, educators can develop the capacity to recognize the abilities and learning needs of their particular students. “Teachers must have and use data about their students to guide pedagogical decisions about which aspects of practices are most suited to their children” (McIntyre, Roseberry, & Gonzalez, 2001, p. 116).

Values and beliefs can be delicate issues to bring up in conversations about student achievement. Nonetheless, it is the educator’s responsibility to address them if they know they are part of the student achievement equation. Delpit (1995) says that “teachers are in an ideal position... to attempt to get all of the issues on the table in order to initiate true dialogue... I suggest that the results of such interactions may be the most powerful and empowering coalescence yet seen in the educational realm – for all teachers and for all students they teach” (p. 46).

If indicators of low student achievement are associated with students’ particular cultural, class, or ethnic groups, that fact is an indicator that school staffs need to develop the knowledge, skills, and pedagogical practices that are necessary to improve student achievement. In order to develop those skills and practices, they will also need to engage in courageous, truthful conversations about social class, race, ethnicity, and teaching and learning. Cultural proficiency is too important to leave to chance. We are using cultural

lenses, both organizational and personal, to filter our expectations of and assumptions about others.

In order to move from merely tolerating diversity in our schools to transformation for equity, culturally proficient leaders of schools today assess their own cultural knowledge. They use demographics to enlighten policy and practice instead of seeing demographics as a challenge. Their schools show that diversity is not only respected but esteemed. From this perspective, the focus on student achievement can shift from the student and family to the teacher and school. Teachers can begin to adapt their practices to reflect a more culturally responsive pedagogy and leaders can integrate cultural knowledge provoking significant changes to policies, procedures, and practices.

### **Culturally Responsive Strategies**

School reform literature suggests that when schools succeed with culturally diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, there exists a powerful belief system of high expectations that rejects deficit assumptions about children and their cultures, abilities, and life circumstances (Belinda Williams, 2003, p. 190).

When educators, using culturally responsive principles and methods, they acknowledge the strengths that socioeconomically disadvantaged learners bring to the classroom. They understand that their students are culturally different from their White middle-class peers and they have unrecognized abilities and underdeveloped potential (Williams & Newcombe, 1994). When one sees culturally responsive teaching in a

classroom, one sees an educator who uses the experiences and values that diverse students bring into the classroom as resources for teaching and learning instead of dismissing them or seeing them as barriers to instruction (Gay, 2000).

To accomplish this, teachers can develop skills in cultural proficiency as well as skills in designing curriculum, instruction, and assessment that meet the needs of all populations of students, including students who are economically disadvantaged, ethnic and racial minorities, and English language learners (Gay, 2000).

Culturally responsive instruction began as an exploration in how to reduce the achievement gap between White students and black students. As stated by Ladson-Billings (1997), who described the theory and practice of culturally responsive pedagogy through her study of outstanding educators of African American students, culturally responsive instruction is “an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 18). Culturally responsive pedagogy, a component of a culturally responsive, high performing school where all populations of students are succeeding, is a method of instruction that can help close achievement gaps not only between different races or minorities but also between social classes. Culture is central to learning as well as being central to culturally responsive teaching.

Taking this approach to education, looking at the classroom from the inside out, suggests that great teaching does not begin with curriculum or standards-based tests but with the students themselves. Educators who espouse this method of instruction truly know their students, value the cultural experiences they bring to the classroom, and leverage these experiences into helping students acquire knowledge. Ladson-Billings

reinforces this concept by when she states that teachers should build upon this base of cultural knowledge by “using the knowledge and skills students bring to the classroom as a foundation for new learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1997, p. 124).

Ladson-Billings (1997), from her study of exemplary teachers of African American students, defines the characteristics of culturally responsive teachers. These characteristics can be also extended to those who teach other diverse populations including low socioeconomic status (SES) students. She describes a culturally responsive teacher as one who:

1. Sees herself as an artist, and teaching as an art
2. Sees herself as part of the community, and teaching as giving something back to the community, and encourages students to do the same
3. Believes all students can succeed
4. Helps students make connections between their community, national, and global identities
5. Sees teaching as “pulling knowledge out” – like “mining” (p. 34)

What are teachers and students doing in a culturally responsive classroom? How do teachers know whether they are practicing culturally responsive instruction? There are several characteristics of culturally responsive teaching that are also identified in several other studies on effective teaching. Irvine and Armento (2001) identify ten basic beliefs and strategies for culturally responsive educators. Culturally responsive educators:

1. Hold high expectations and personal expectations for each child.
2. Provide for each child equitable access to the necessary learning resources and sufficient opportunities to learn.

3. Ensure that learning outcomes are meaningful, relevant, useful, and important to each child.
4. Nurture learning-support communities for each child
5. Facilitate the maximum growth of each learner by making informed adaptations that match and build upon the learner's prior knowledge, experience, skills, and beliefs.
6. Build positive and supportive school and classroom learning environments that are grounded in mutual and genuine respect for cultural diversity.
7. Promote classroom climates built on social justice, democracy, and equity.
8. Promote classroom empowerment, self-efficacy, positive self-regard, and a belief in societal reform.
9. Value diversity as well as human commonalities.
10. Believe that it is their role and responsibility to provide effective and empowering instruction for each child. (p. 23)

In addition to Ladson-Billings (1997) and Irving and Armento's (2001) strategies, it is also important to include the three R's of instruction, rigor, relevance, and relationships. The "Three R's" have recently been the foundation for secondary school reform and high school design (McNulty & Quaglia, 2007). These concepts also compliment the theoretical foundations of culturally responsive pedagogy. Educators ensure there is rigor in the classroom by exposing students to challenging classwork with both academic and social support. Teachers teach to the highest standards and have high expectations for every student. Karen Chenoweth (2007), who studied many successful schools in low-income neighborhoods, said, "They do not assume that their students are

so crippled by poverty and discrimination that they will never be able to meet high standards” (217).

Many teachers are continually designing curriculum that challenges students to use higher order thinking skills. However, challenging coursework alone is not enough with proper academic support. Irvine and Armento (2001) believe teachers must assure “equitable access to necessary learning resources and sufficient opportunities to learn for each child, and making instructional adaptations that match and build upon the student’s knowledge, experiences, skills, and beliefs” (p. 23). This type of rigor in the classroom provides no room for excuses.

Relevance in the classroom refers to how students can and will use newly acquired knowledge. How do teachers provide relevance in the classroom? There are several ways however examining classroom curriculum is an excellent place for educators to begin. Teachers can use curriculum that reflects the cultural diversity in the classroom. Teachers who know their students well can illustrate content ideas using culturally relevant examples. (Ladson-Billings, 1997, Nieto, 2000). Using culturally relevant examples motivates students to learn and gives them an important opportunity to access materials that represent their heritage. Classroom experiences do not have to be limited to broad-based texts that may be meant to serve the majority culture.

Constructivist teaching strategies also align well with culturally responsive teaching methods. Teachers can give students voice and choice in how they show what they know. This model of teaching is more student directed in both the lesson and assessment and less directed in methods that rely more on teacher control (Solomon, 2005). Each of these types of classroom learning experiences can be extended to

students' everyday experiences making classroom learning integrated with out-of-school experiences (Phuntsog, 1999).

The last quality, relationships, indicates that culturally responsive teachers build caring and supportive connections with students, parents, and communities (Gay, 2000). Beegle (2007) explains one aspect of relationships between students and teachers; students and teachers are obliged to see how they are like one another to be in a relationship. This means that teachers and students identify with each other and are able to value different lived experiences. When a strong and caring relationship exists between teachers and students, students are more willing to learn. This relationship is not only focused on a student's academic success but also exists in partnership with their personal life. In other words, it is necessary for teachers and administrators to like kids in order to develop the kinds of relationships that lead to trust and caring (Chenoweth, 2007).

Ruby Payne (2001) emphasizes that, "The key to achievement for students from poverty is in creating relationships with them." Most people assume that teachers, in particular elementary school teachers, have a natural ability to form relationships with their students. This way of thinking would be naïve. Relationships require a substantial amount of effort on behalf of all educators. Socioeconomically disadvantaged and minority students often have abilities that have not been recognized or fully developed that may be surfaced by a caring teacher.

Educators can often be heard to say, when describing culturally responsive teaching and strategies, that the strategies are just good teaching and nothing more. However, when coupled with the ability to acknowledge their students' cultural backgrounds as well as their own, as well as demonstrating other cultural proficiencies,

good teaching becomes better (Ladson-Billings, 1997; Williams and Woods, 1997; Zeichner, 2003). In short, good teaching is more than just having strong content knowledge and aligning curriculum with classroom based and statewide assessments. These characteristics are important however they can be made stronger by teachers who are practicing more culturally responsive methods of instruction.



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### **Qualitative Interviewing**

Hittleman and Simon (2006) suggest that research producers need strategies and procedures for conceptualizing, developing, implementing, and reporting research. This study relied on qualitative research methods to both gather data and analyze the data. This qualitative approach to researching cultural proficiency and culturally responsive pedagogy yielded data rich in description of people, places, and conversations (Bogden & Biklen, 2007, Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Qualitative interviewers also use this information to form explanations that are grounded in the details, evidence, and examples of the interviews (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). As a qualitative interviewer, I was more interested in the understanding, knowledge, and insights of the interviewees.

The very nature of this study, understanding the cultural proficiency of teachers and how they teach, lends itself well to some guiding premises of qualitative interviewing. Rubin and Rubin (1995) posit three themes: (a) successful interviewers understand importance of culture, (b) interviewers are not neutral but participants in the relationship, and (c) the purpose is to hear, understand, and to give public voice. Culture, relationships, and empathy are part of the foundations for cultural proficiency. Furthermore, I was seeking “. . . a research method that seeks to describe and analyze complex experiences” as Bogden & Biklen (2007) described including the experiences of cultural proficient teachers who used culturally responsive teaching.

## **Participants, Selection Process, and Interview Structure**

The primary source of data for this study came from elementary school teacher interviews. Ladson-Billings (1997), from her study The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American Children, used teacher interviews and classroom observations to understand the voices of the teachers who were effective in their classrooms with minority students. Due to time and resources, this study will be limited to collecting information solely from phenomenological interviews.

Chenoweth (2007) also used interviews and observations of teachers, coupled with interviews with principals and staff, to understand how schools that served underprivileged minorities were being successful. She was able to observe schools as a complete community of parents, teachers, support staff, and principals working together. My brief visits to interview teachers allowed me similar access and similar views. However, my experiences only allowed limited insights into the schools and how they serve the community. Most of my time was spent in the classroom speaking with teachers.

I talked with each principal for approximately thirty to forty minutes. We talked about their schools and teachers they were going to recommend. They also described why they felt their school was successful with low-income students. From this interview, I got a glimpse into how they organize their schools and serve the low-income communities. I included some of this information in the school profiles that follow in chapter four.

I was also able to speak for short periods of time with secretaries, counselors, curriculum planners. The information from my conversations with these staff members is

not included in the data. Nonetheless, this information did help me understand the context in which the teachers worked.

I interviewed teachers who were employed in a public elementary school and taught grades between one and five. In order to surface the concerns for low SES non-minority students, I chose teachers who worked in schools where a significant number of students, approximately 75%, were White. In addition, each of the schools had a significant student population, approximately 50%, that was qualified for or enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program. School report card data from Office of the Superintendent of Public Education was analyzed to select schools that exhibited the above qualities as well as a range of performance outcomes with students from low-income families. The three schools selected demonstrated high, medium, and lower performance outcomes on the fourth grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning. At the time of this study, each school consistently made Annual Yearly Progress according to No Child Left Behind guidelines with the exception of one school whose performance outcomes were lower than the other two schools in the study.

Teachers were selected from three schools in two school districts situated in the Southwest Washington area that met the above criteria: (a) Burnett Elementary, (b) Marshall Falls Elementary, and (c) Mark Twain Elementary. Three schools provided a larger sample of teachers from which to select as well as provided different cultural contexts in which the teachers taught. I asked the district superintendents and principals for permission to complete the study. Please see Table 3 for specific school demographics.

Table 3  
*School Demographics*

	Burnett	Marshall Falls	Mark Twain
Percent White	75	69	78
Percent Free or Reduced Meals	53	46	59
Total Number Students	565	423	510

Note: Information obtained from Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2007

Each school had at least 45% of their students participating in the free and reduced program. Burnett and Mark Twain had 75% or more of their student population described as White and had similar enrollment numbers. The lowest percentage of non-minorities was Marshall Falls with 69%. Marshall Falls also had the smallest population of students at 423.

After choosing the schools and obtaining permission, I selected teachers based upon the strategy of principal recommendation as well as teacher recommendation at one school. Principals, after being contacted about the purpose of the study, recommended teachers for the study who have had success with diverse student populations. Teacher selection based upon principal recommendation was a strategy that led me to interview grade level teams as well as individuals. This strategy allowed also me to interview teachers from a variety of experiences as well as years in the classroom. In addition, I specifically wanted to focus on successful teachers who would offer me the best chance to view what works in schools in terms of cultural proficiency and cultural responsive teaching.

Once teachers were recommended, I initially met with them to review the purpose of the study, the format of the study, any risks involved, and possible interview dates and times. Getting to know each other in this initial meeting seemed to put the teachers at

ease. I also felt my recent experience as a counselor helped alleviate some of the natural tension that can often exist between an administrator and teacher or supervisor and supervisee. I wanted them to view me more as a counselor trying to find out how best to serve students rather than as an evaluator trying to find out what was wrong in their classroom.

One of my goals for this research project was to understand the meaning people in education make of their experiences in the classroom. Seidman (2006) advocates phenomenological interviewing that “encourages people to reconstruct their experience actively within the context of their lives.” I followed a modified protocol of Seidman’s (2006) three part phenomenological interview process.

Instead of three separate 90 minute interviews, I interviewed teachers on two separate occasions. The first interview included a focused life history. The questions I generated focused on where they grew up, their parent’s socioeconomic status, values they were taught, challenges they faced growing up, and how they would like to be remembered. From these questions, I hoped to learn or capture a snapshot of what they experienced growing up. This snapshot would give me a better understanding of who they are. From the first interview, this researcher gained insight into the context of the interviewee’s life experiences and into the lives of those around them. Patton (1989) stated, “Without context there is little possibility of exploring the meaning of an experience.”

The second interview focused on allowing the teachers to reconstruct the details of how they think about and teach students from low-income families as well as encouraging the teachers to reflect on the meaning their experiences hold for them

(Seidman, 2006). The teachers told me what was like to be an elementary teacher in a low-income school. Each teacher interviewed had different experiences that shaped how they viewed the world, how those experiences inevitably shaped their attitudes and how they teach. In essence, they identified common threads that ran through the different parts of their lives.

In the first interview I asked the teachers to tell as much as possible about him or her in light of the topic up to the present time. I asked them to reconstruct their early experiences in their families, in school, with friends, in their neighborhoods, and at work. In the second interview, they were asked about their job responsibilities and a little about their school. In addition to asking any follow-up questions from the first interview, the second interview probed how cultural proficiency and culturally responsive pedagogy may manifest themselves in the context of how teachers think about and teach students from low-income families.

The last part of the second interview focused on making sense or making meaning between their life experiences and their experience teaching low-income students. I had to ask teachers, “What meaning do teachers make between their life experiences before teaching and their current experiences in the classroom?” Most importantly, I asked why they were successful with the low SES population of students given their life experiences were oriented in the middle class?

Seidman (2006) stated that, “making sense or making meaning requires that the teachers look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation.” This part of the second interview could only be fruitful if the foundation for it was established in the first interview. I also wished to capitalize on any relationship that

was established over the two interview process. I intended to elicit examples, narrative, histories, stories to help understand what the teacher thought and ground answers in their experiences to give nuance (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Each individual interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and followed a set of questions (see Appendix A for the complete set of questions). Due to the inductive nature of interviews, the questions for the teachers evolved after each interview (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Therefore, every question was not asked to all teachers. I asked questions that gave me information regarding individual students in their classrooms as well as their families. The questions were mostly open ended allowing teachers to elaborate on their responses as well as give me information that may lead to follow up questions. I also asked teachers about low-income students who struggled as well as students who were successful. The teachers' experiences with these two types of students offered further context to their attitudes and beliefs. Lastly, I wanted a question that shed light on commonly heard teachers' comments about schools where it is difficult to work.

My experience as a teacher and school counselor helped provide me with important context to teacher's responses. With this in mind, they did not need to explain any educational specific terms as they may have to with someone outside the field of education.

I audio taped each interview. I also took notes during each interview. Seidman (2006) advised, "The primary method of creating text from interviews is to tape-record the interviews and to transcribe them." Seidman also suggested, "If something is not clear in the transcript, the researcher can return to the source and check for accuracy."

It is important to distinguish that I did not do any classroom observations. This study focused on teacher talk rather than what I would actually be able to observe if I were present in their classroom. Time for this study did not permit me to spend time in the classroom observing a lesson or other interactions between teachers and students. Therefore, teachers had to self-report on what they did in the classroom. The reliability of this self-report was never confirmed by concrete observations.

### **Data Analysis**

I transcribed data from the life history interview and the work in classroom interview. From a close reading plus judgment, I marked what was of interest in the text. These chunks of interest from the transcription were then sorted into broad themes and categories. By reducing the material, I began the process of analyzing, interpreting, and making meaning of the data.

From their life experiences, I examined the transcripts for common responses to questions that focused on their class, life struggles, and values which they were taught. From these responses, I wanted to capture a context that I would later be able to link to responses from the second interview. Understanding how they were raised, who raised them, and what values they were taught would help me begin to understand the richness of each teacher's life. These learned values were sorted into two categories: positive impact of learned values on how they taught in their classroom and negative impact of learned values on how they taught in their classroom.

Using the frameworks of cultural proficiency and culturally responsive teaching, I analyzed the data from the second interview to examine the teachers' culturally



proficiency and to what extent did they use culturally responsive pedagogy. I also examined the alternative. Did their discourse demonstrate cultural blindness, cultural incapacity, or cultural destructiveness? After determining whether their talk was more indicative of cultural proficiency, cultural blindness, cultural incapacity, or cultural destructiveness, I separated the teachers into two groups: culturally unskilled teachers and culturally adept teachers. It was apparent that five teachers demonstrated high levels of caring for their students yet lacked a clear understanding of low SES populations as well as the skills to teach them. On the contrary, seven teachers demonstrated higher skill levels of cultural proficiency. They were described as culturally adept teachers. The concepts of culturally unskilled teachers versus culturally adept teachers will be explored further in chapter six.

I also attempted to examine teachers' beliefs and practices regarding tolerance and equity. I used their skill level in cultural proficiency to determine if they were exhibiting attitudes and behaviors based on tolerance or if they were creating classrooms based on equity. For example, when examining the data, I looked for selections where teachers talked about how they used demographics to inform their practice or how they leveraged the strengths of their students. If teachers exhibited these behaviors in their talk, they were considered to be creating classrooms based on equity. If teachers neglected the demographics, focused on deficits, or placed the burden of academic success solely on the student, they were considered to be creating classrooms based on tolerance.

Documents relevant to the study were also collected such as school improvement plans. I wanted to understand somewhat the context of the schools where these teachers

taught. School improvement plans give the general outline of a school's vision and mission. School improvement plans also generate action plans that address the challenges schools face. These documents were examined and analyzed within the context of cultural proficiency and cultural responsive pedagogy.

In order to arrive at any conclusions, I was required to get the best picture of how teachers think about low SES non-minorities as well as what strategies they use to teach this population in their classrooms. Examining the teachers' two interviews, walking the school campuses, and speaking with the principals allowed insight into how students living in poverty are taught. The results of the data analysis are given in chapters five, six, and seven.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### TWELVE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS AND THEIR SCHOOLS

In an effort to gain insight into evaluating the cultural proficiency of teachers, 12 elementary school teachers were interviewed. Understanding their work, in the context of their personal and familial history is essential because their thoughts, interactions, and especially their teaching practices stem from their cultural positions as far as class, race, and ethnicity are concerned. Although the teachers' lives differed greatly from one another, without exception the 12 teachers in this study were dedicated teachers. They all had immense care and concern for their students. Evidence of this was abundant in both interviews with each teacher.

In order for the reader to get a more complete picture of the teachers and the context in which elementary teachers work, I have included two essential components in this chapter. First, the three schools where the elementary teachers work are briefly described. The descriptions include the schools' demographics, School Improvement Plans (SIP), and my impressions of the staff and principals from my many visits. SIPs are road maps or guides that show the school's strengths and weaknesses. The plans are organized according to Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) test scores. Most SIPs are divided into sections that focus on the school's vision, data, and action plans. SIPs are important to note due to their role in how schools develop and implement their action plans to address achievement gaps between students in different demographics.

Second, brief profiles of each of the teachers are provided. Included in the profiles are sections that describe their current responsibilities, their families, their socioeconomic status history, as well as a few individual details that better develop the overall profile of each teacher.

## **School Profiles**

### **Burnett Elementary School**

Burnett Elementary School is located in a suburban area in Southwestern Washington and it serves as a neighborhood school to approximately 565 students in grades K-5. The 1970s campus is well maintained however the school is showing some wear and tear from the 30 plus years of existence. The houses that surround the school were also built in the 1970s and quite a few are in disrepair. There are low-income apartments situated directly across the street from the school. Many Burnett students live in the apartments.

Burnett Elementary reports a Free and Reduced Lunch rate of 53%, a Special Education rate of 10%, and a Transitional Bilingual or English Language Learner rate of 13%. 75% of the school's 565 students are White. The second largest population of students is Hispanic with 9% of the total student body. There are slightly more boys than girls, with 54% and 46% respectively.

The school environment and staff at Burnett is friendly and welcoming. The 29 teachers at Burnett have an average of approximately 14 years teaching experience. Nearly 62% of them have their masters degrees and 100% meet the No Child Left Behind Highly Qualified requirements. They have produced the following results on the

Washington Assessment on Student Learning (WASL) as represented by the graph in Figure 1.

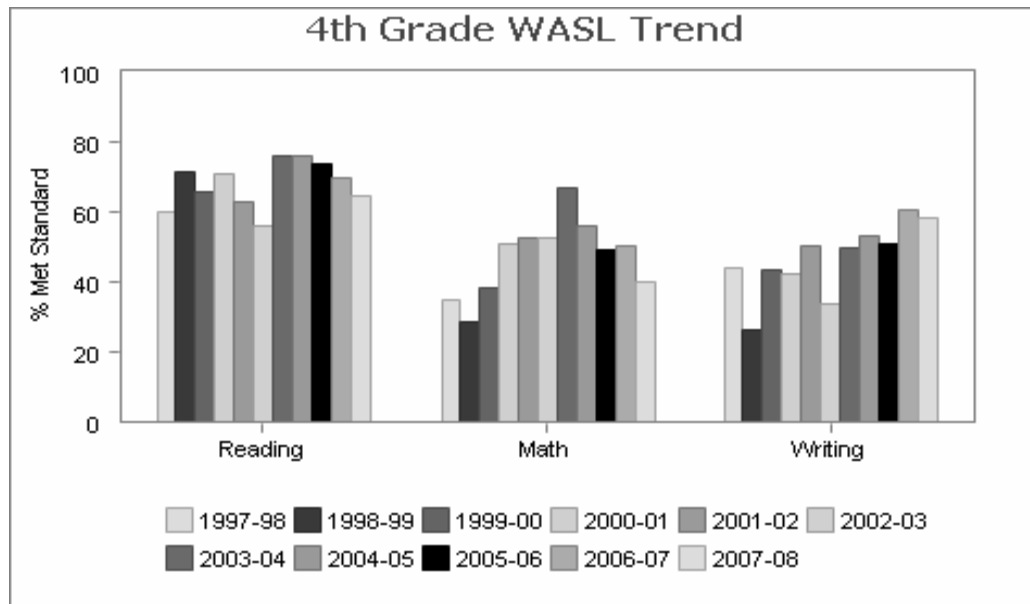


Figure 1: Burnett Elementary, Fourth Grade WASL Trend, 1997-2008. Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI Website, 2007).

Since the 2002-2003 school year, Burnett has failed to make Annual Yearly Progress one year. In 2006-2007, the fourth grade low-income students failed to make AYP in reading. Burnett recently made AYP in all required subgroups, including low-income. As the graph indicates, progress has been steady in writing yet sporadic in both reading and math.

Burnett Elementary’s School Improvement Plan is 51 pages long. It is divided into four sections, vision, data, action plans, and resources. The WASL data for students in the free and reduced lunch program are reported in comparison with other minority groups as well as White students that are not on the free and reduced lunch program. The low SES students do not perform as well as the White middle class students on the WASL. At Burnett, the action plan for reading indicated that the staff read articles

focused on “high expectations in low poverty schools.” Other than this small section in the action plan for reading, the needs for low SES students are not mentioned or addressed in the Burnett SIP.

Burnett’s declaration in their School Improvement Plan (SIP) focuses on building bridges between the school and families as well as meeting children’s basic needs. The following declaration is taken directly from the SIP:

At Burnett we believe that learning is a partnership between families and school. In an effort to help children feel and be safe at work and play, the partnership will strive to make sure that children’s basic needs (belonging, freedom, fun, power and survival) are met. For this to happen, Burnett students need to develop self-discipline, cooperation, responsibility and problem-solving skills. Everyone needs to show and receive respect for selves, others and property.

The commitment to families is evidenced by monthly Family Nights. Each month, Burnett hosts a family night that offers the families a free meal as well as some type of education opportunity or entertainment. In addition to their Family Nights, Burnett participates in the national parent education program Strengthening Families. Each month, a group of approximately 24 parents is invited to participate in parent education classes that are facilitated by a trained school counselor. Free childcare is provided by Burnett to promote parent participation.

In her third year as principal of Burnett, Beverly Smith works hard to make sure students feel welcome and cared for at Burnett. Teachers appreciate the time and effort that she puts in to making Burnett a place where students cannot wait to get to in the morning and do not want to leave in the afternoon. Beverly was very positive when she

talked about her staff and students. She said, “There is always something good every day that happens here.” She also shared frustrations about the inequities that exist in the district between schools such as hers and the more affluent schools in the Southern part of the district. For example, she does not have a Parent Teacher Organization that can raise \$40,000 to provide tutoring nor does she have an assistant principal to help with student and family needs. Overall, after more than 30 years in education, Beverly is hopeful about her students and knows that Burnett is the right place for her. When talking about her students she said, “These kids are so loving. They are survivors in spite of it all.”

### **Marshall Falls Elementary School**

Marshall Falls Elementary is part of the same school district as Burnett in Southwestern Washington. It serves as a neighborhood school to approximately 423 students in grades K – 5. Of those students, 53% are male and 47% are female. In terms of ethnicity, 69% are White, and the remaining 31% of the students make up a variety of minority groups. 10% of the students are Hispanic. Marshall Falls reports a Free or Reduced-Price Meals Rate of 46%, a Special Education level of 17%, and Transitional Bilingual population of 10%.

Marshall Falls is situated right behind a large shopping complex and sits on a property that is next to a busy highway. The school was built in the 1990s. The grounds are well maintained and the staff is very friendly and talkative. Visitors are treated like family at Marshall Falls.

The 31 teachers at Marshall Falls have an average of approximately 13 years teaching experience. Nearly 75% of them have their masters degrees and similar to Burnett, 100% meet the No Child Left Behind Highly Qualified requirements. They have produced the following results on the Washington Assessment on Student Learning (WASL) as represented by the graph in Figure 2.

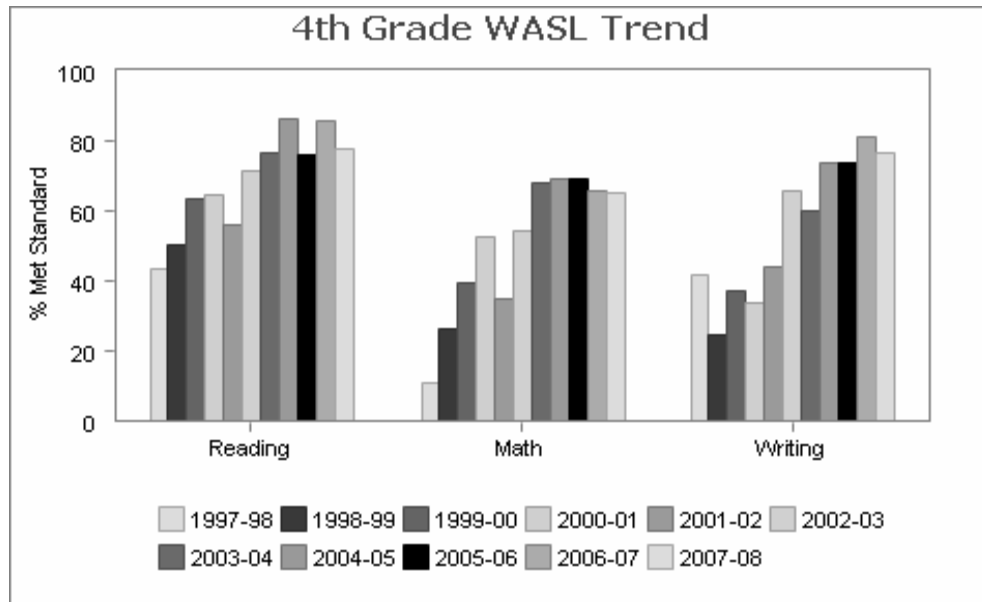


Figure 2: Marshall Falls Elementary, Fourth Grade WASL Trend, 1997-2008. Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI Website, 2007).

In terms of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), Marshall Falls is proficient in every area. Marshall Falls is a high achieving school. Recently, Marshall Falls Elementary School was honored as a school of distinction by the state superintendent. This is the second consecutive year that Marshall Falls has received this award. The award honors the top five percent of schools in the state for significant improvements in their achievement scores over a period of six years.



Marshall Falls Elementary's School Improvement Plan (SIP) is 53 pages long. The format for the school's SIP is similar to Burnett's SIP. At Marshall Falls Elementary, low SES students perform lower than their White middle class counterparts on all parts of the WASL but do make Annual Yearly Progress. Regardless of the large amount of low SES students, approximately half of the student population, there is no mention of low SES students or strategies to address the needs of this at-risk population. Strategies proposed in the SIP are generalized to all students. The following vision is an excerpt directly from the SIP:

The vision of Marshall Falls Elementary is to create and sustain an atmosphere that promotes a Collaborative Learning Community that will help students function in a changing environment and attain their highest potential.

Similar to Burnett, Marshall Falls focuses on bringing together the schools, families, and community to support student learning. The sustainability of collaborative learning communities is built upon strong teacher leadership at Marshall Falls. One teacher with 30 years of experience talked at length about the culture at Marshall Falls and the importance of teacher leadership.

This is kind of a text-book school. It's been kinda fun for me. Because you read about it, talk about it, and move towards it, so for me to have this opportunity to come here at this time in my career is special. Because this is what the text books talk about. It's an amazing culture. And it's not just Dorothy (Principal). Dorothy could kill it but Dorothy enhances it. It's teacher leadership. This culture in this building has gone on longer than it has had Dorothy. Just from me being a student of it all and paying attention to it. It's the teacher leadership and the culture. It's

the strong teacher leadership in the building that makes it happen (Janice, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Comparable to Burnett, Marshall Falls is led by an experienced and visionary principal with more than thirty years of educational experiences to draw upon. Mrs. Dorothy Anderson has been the principal at Marshall Falls for eight years. She is passionate about her staff and students. She recognized the great culture of teacher leadership at Marshall Falls when she arrived and said her first job was to “not get in their way” and “listen to them.” She has a great sense of humor and is very proud of the work her staff does on a daily basis to strengthen and improve student learning. She is most humble about the most recent recognition and places the honor upon firmly upon the teachers. When speaking about her teachers and the great things that were happening at Marshall Falls she said, “We do it together and it comes out and explodes!”

### **Mark Twain Elementary School**

Mark Twain Elementary is from a separate school district than Burnett or Marshall Falls. It is the third elementary school from suburban Southwestern Washington used for the study. It is a neighborhood school to approximately 510 students in grades K–5. Of those students, 48% are male and 52% are female. In terms of ethnicity, 78% are White, and the remaining 22% of the students make up a variety of minority groups. 8% of the students are Hispanic. Mark Twain reports a Free or Reduced-Price Meals Rate of 59%, a Special Education level of 12%, and Transitional Bilingual population of 13%.

Mark Twain Elementary is a newer school situated in the heart of an older neighborhood in town. The "first" Mark Twain school was built in 1949 and was torn

down in the summer of 1998 to make room for the new Mark Twain on the same site. A team of staff, parents and community members assisted in designing the school for the future. Students and staff moved into the new structure with the start of the 1999-2000 school year. The new Mark Twain building has flexible learning spaces and the latest technology. It is truly a state-of-the art facility. Mark Twain is a friendly school with teachers who walk their students to the busses every day regardless of their grade level. Like Marshall Falls, office staff is on the front line eager to help visitors and students with anything they may need.

The 27 teachers at Mark Twain have an average of approximately 10 years teaching experience. Nearly 63% of them have their master’s degrees and similar to Burnett, 100% meet the No Child Left Behind Highly Qualified requirements. They have produced the following results on the Washington Assessment on Student Learning (WASL) as represented by the graph in Figure 3.

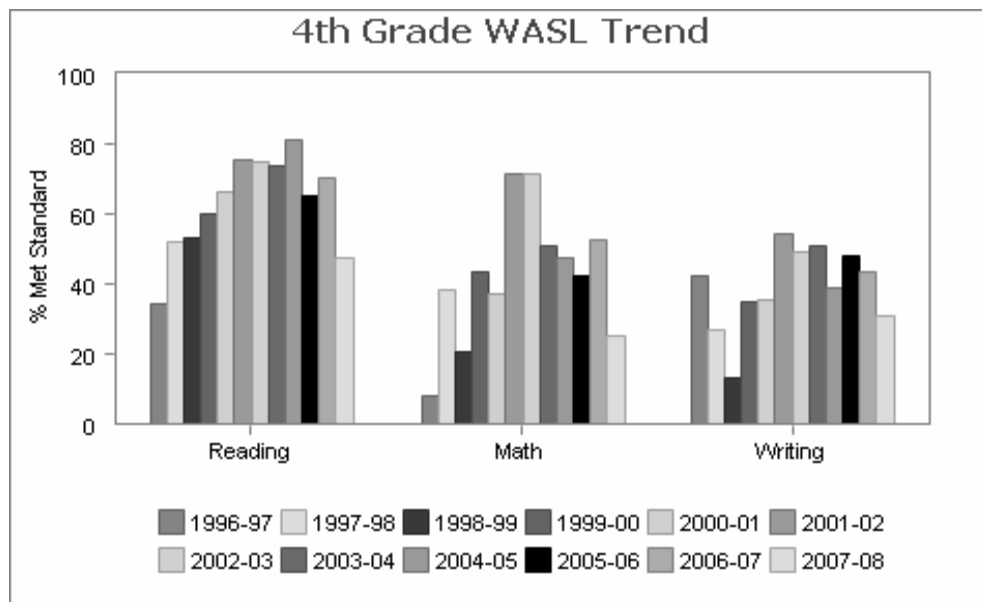


Figure 3: Mark Twain Elementary, Fourth Grade WASL Trend, 1997-2008.

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI Website, 2007).

At the time of the study, Mark Twain continually met the standard for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and had made recent progress in both reading and math. Since the last interview at Mark Twain, recent test scores have been reported with significant drops in all three content areas. These large drops in performance are an anomaly and remain a puzzle to both staff and administration.

Mark Twain's School Improvement Plan (SIP) is 54 pages. The format for the school's SIP is similar to the other schools' SIP. Low SES students perform markedly lower than their White middle class counterparts on all parts of the WASL. As with Marshall Falls' SIP, there is no other mention of low SES students or strategies to address the needs of this at-risk population. Strategies proposed in the SIP are generalized to all students. Mark Twain has a mission and core beliefs that drive their instruction every day:

Through diverse learning experiences Mark Twain students will become lifelong learners who will be competent, positive, responsible citizens, prepared for an ever-changing society.

The core beliefs of the Mark Twain revolve around five major values: teamwork, community, high expectations, readiness to learn, and student learning. In order to establish a strong and positive learning community, Mark Twain implements several programs such as Family Literacy Nights, Peer Mediators, and Parent Access, a program that allows parents to access information on-line. When defining high expectations, teachers at Mark Twain believe all students are capable of learning and making academic growth in their own ways, at their own rates.

## **Teacher Profiles**

The 12 teachers in this study had varied backgrounds, personal values, different reasons for going into the field, and teaching philosophies. Teaching in predominantly White low-income schools was their primary commonality. Teachers in this study reflected the national trends in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. Eleven were White; one was Latino. Nine teachers were females while the remaining three were male. Two teachers grew up experiencing situational poverty, eight were from middle-class families, and two were raised in affluent families. All except two, the two with the most years in the profession, were considered to be from the middle-class at the time of their interviews.

Nearly all of the teachers had parents who stressed the importance of education and attending college. Nine out of twelve teachers had at least one parent graduate with a four year degree. Four out of the twelve had both parents graduate from college.

Most teachers' teaching experiences were concentrated in urban settings. Seven teachers had spent most of their lives in the Pacific Northwest. The remaining five had a variety of teaching experiences across the country. The amount of time each teacher had been in elementary education varied widely. The most experienced teachers were two teachers who had been in the field for 36 and 30 years. The least experienced of the teachers was completing her first year in the classroom.

Table 4  
*Teacher Demographics*

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>Number of Teachers (n=12)</b>
0-5 years experience	4
6-10 years experience	4
11-20 years experience	2
21+ years experience	2
Female	9
Male	3
White	11
Latino	1
Poverty background	2
Middle class background	8
Affluent background	2

One essential aspect of cultural proficiency is to know how a person’s experiences have influenced how they think and what they do. Knowing the teachers’ life experiences and how those life experiences impact their classroom, will be critical when examining their level of cultural proficiency. These profiles will provide the reader a necessary glimpse into the life experiences of the teachers as well as provide a context that will help the reader understand the relationship between life experiences and cultural proficiency in the classroom. What follows are the teacher profiles organized by the number of years each teacher has been teaching, from the fewest years in the classroom to the most years in the classroom. In the interests of confidentiality, I am not linking the individual teachers to specific schools.

## **Melissa – One Year Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

Melissa was a White 34 year old second grade teacher. She was born on the east coast but moved to Southwest Washington when she was in kindergarten and has been here since the move. Melissa was brought up in a rural middle class environment and thought of herself as a tomboy. She was number four of six children who are also still in the area. When speaking about her childhood, she described it as “every kid’s dream.”

Her mom and dad played traditional roles as her dad worked full time at a community college while her mom stayed home to take care of the kids. Melissa recalled having tons of chores. Her parents taught her to be open-minded, frugal and a hard worker. She talked about the lessons she learned from her parents.

When I got older, they weren’t passing out cars and money. I needed to pay my own bills and that if I was having trouble paying my bills, I didn’t go and ask someone for money. I went and got another job or I didn’t eat out every night. I made sacrifices to get what I needed (Melissa, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

I sensed that she felt very independent and that her family had taught her if you work hard, you can be successful. I also sensed that she believed this opportunity existed for most people.

She talked about her purpose in life and how at this time, she was uncertain if teaching was that purpose. She didn’t talk about any passion about kids or for teaching. Melissa wanted to be remembered as someone who would never hurt anyone on purpose and as someone who would always be there if someone needed her.

### **Grace – Three Years Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

Grace was a 30 year old third grade teacher who originally was from Southern California but calls the Pacific Northwest home now. She was White, middle-class, recently married, and has a 17 month old boy. She's married to an African-American and recently moved into a new home.

She described her family as lower middle class but they appeared middle class. What she meant was that times were tight yet holidays and birthdays still seemed great because the gifts were still there. They ate a lot of TV dinners because both mom and dad worked. She was influenced by both parents but at different levels. Her dad had always been there and had been "unconditional." Mom was also but in different ways. She described them both as very positive people with "you can do it" type of attitudes and a strong sense of forgiveness. They taught her the value of being honest, hard working, and happy.

When talking about big challenges in her life, getting to college was number one on her list. She didn't take the natural path or traditional path to college. She dropped out of high school her last year. She was a cheerleader, in running start, in everything. However, the last year there were family problems. She talked about "the pressure of everything" and just "holding it in." She left high school and just didn't go back. She did not elaborate on the problems and I didn't pry any further. She ended up getting her GED, going to the community college, and then transferring to a university teaching program. Grace talked about it as a very long journey and she felt great that she overcame it. She said, "I'm proud of myself for doing that."



Grace talked about her purpose in life and the role that her passions have played. When she was younger, she was goal oriented and focused on results. It's different now. At this time, she wants to "just enjoy life, just get better about certain aspects of my career, and cultivate the passions in my life rather than achieving." In terms of her teaching, her aim is to "make classrooms safe, give kids some peace to move on with, then I've done my job. That makes me a happy person."

### **Jill – Three Years Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

Jill was a White second grade teacher. She described some tough times growing up and not having money but is now part of the middle class. She is 30 years old and has been married since she was 18. Jill grew up locally and lives less than ten miles from her childhood home where her mother still lives.

Both of Jill's parents had jobs yet she suffered through difficult times as a child due to her father's alcoholism. When asked what her family would spend any money they had, she replied, "He drank most of his income. He would come home, go to the garage and have a beer. He would work on cars. He would tell me about all of his big dreams and that's the way it goes." Most of her childhood memories were negative in nature ranging from living in a house with no working septic system to listening to her parents constant fighting.

During the interview, Jill would often self disclose. This was the only interview where I felt more like a therapist than a doctoral student working with teachers. When speaking about her journey through life she said, "I'm still a work in progress. I used to feel like a number one but now I'm a number eight on a daily basis. Sometimes I feel like

a charged number ten but it doesn't last for very long." She also said she assumed too much about her students because she knows about the "certain inadequacies that everyone has." I wondered whether and how she projected any of her experiences on to her students.

She also reported using her experiences in a positive way because she does have some understanding of hardship and how it affects young students. This is what she had to say about her purpose in life.

There is a divine purpose. Mine is to have a better understanding of people... to help nurture the good qualities that are in them, help point them out, help them grow like any old plant I plant in the yard. You can grow a dandelion as easy as you can grow a rose (Jill, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

Even though she did not allude to religion, she did give a sense that she was spiritual but not religious. She identified with the disenfranchised children in her classroom. She acknowledged their existence and saw them as needing the extra guidance. Jill did not want them to repeat her own experiences. Toward the end of the interview she disclosed that she spent a lot of time growing up thinking her mom hated her. She wanted to be remembered differently. She wanted her children or her students to "know what my love looks like."

### **David – Five Years Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

David was a 31 year old fourth grade teacher who was White, middle class, and married with two children under the age of six. He was one of three boys. Both his father and step-mother are in education. His father recently retired as the deputy superintendent

of a smaller district. David had the unusual experience of going to elementary school with his father as the principal. He was raised in Southern California where his parents still live.

When reflecting about his childhood, David believed he lived in a somewhat unique situation. His parents divorced when he began first grade and for some time, he believed both he and his father lived in situational poverty. However, after his father remarried, the finances stabilized and they were back in a house that was owned, taking skiing trips, and constantly remodeling. He thought of these experiences as a “range of ups and downs.”

The divorce was the greatest obstacle he faced. He believed that working through the challenges made him a better person but readily admits that the first three or four years after the divorce were difficult for everyone involved, including his step-mother who he described as his “real mom.” These painful experiences have influenced him to such an extent that he has considered doing a study on how divorce impacts student learning.

David described himself as a loyal friend and as someone who is internally motivated. He was aware that in education, “nobody is pushing you. It’s what you want to do. Most everything is positive and that is good however some teachers shouldn’t be teaching but nobody has the ability to make them change.” I speculate that this big picture view may have emerged because of his experiences in teaching as well as his conversations with his father.

He demonstrated a great sense of humor during the interview and laughed a lot. When boiling down some of the essentials of good teaching, he thought of the lesson that

he teaches his young students, “Most of life is what you choose, it’s what you make of it.” He believes that this is something he has done and something that most people are capable of achieving.

### **Richard – Seven Years Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

Richard taught a second/third grade split class. He was White, middle class, and the oldest of three boys from Eastern Oregon. He came from a fairly affluent family. Both of Richard’s parents are college educated. His father was a dentist and his mother a stay at home mom with a Masters degree in Fine Arts.

He said, “I feel very fortunate to be brought up the way I was compared to what I see today.” Richard remembered growing up in an affluent community and when his father bought their first luxury car, an Audi. Kids at school called him, “the little rich boy.” However, when speaking about his family’s economic situation, he mentioned that, “dad would give you the shirt off his back. He was always very humble and benevolent.”

Richard was held back in fourth grade due to his low performance in math. He remembered the conversation his dad and his teacher had with him about repeating the grade and he was fine with the decision. To this day, he believes he is right where he is supposed to be.

Richard had an unusual experience in 1999 when he was assaulted to the point of being hospitalized. The experience made him more aware of his position in life. He recalled being more appreciative of what had been given to him. Interestingly enough, he does not believe overcoming the challenge of the experience made him a stronger person.

Instead, he said he has always thought, “If you believe it, you can achieve it.” He admitted it sounded corny however he felt it to be true.

He spoke about how he grew up and how kids grow up today. He compared himself to the students in his classroom.

Growing up was just fun, and it wasn't a struggle and it wasn't about knowing when you're going to eat next. It was about being taken care of and I see a lot of kids today that just look like they're not taken care of. I never had that problem. I was very fortunate. I grew up in a very loving household with two parents (Richard, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

He recognized his good fortune and the differences that exist between him and the children he teaches. Growing up with two parents was normal to him as a young child. He understood that two parent households isn't the norm in a low-income classroom.

When ranking what is important to him in his life, he puts his family and newly married wife as number one and number two. The relationships he has with his students and staff is a close third. He also laughed a lot during the interview and emphasized many times how important it is to laugh. Toward the end of the interview he told about something his dad said to him in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Richard said, “My dad told me that if he could make at least five people laugh a day then he would feel great. It's just something I've always tried to do.” I discovered that Richard lives and teaches by this example.

### **Brynn - Seven Years Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

Brynn was a second grade elementary teacher, who was White, middle-class, recently married, and just moved into a new house. She is 29 years old. She grew up in a

small rural community just outside the city and was the older of two children. She still lives only a few miles from where she grew up and her parents still live in the small town where she grew up. She self-described her family as “small town people.”

When describing her family’s income level, Brynn believed her family was “just above in the socio-economic status.” Early conversations that she had as a child with her father included this memory, “Ever since I was little, ever since I could talk, my dad taught me, “What do we do with money?” And I said, “save it and invest it.”

Brynn was very reflective and recognized qualities about herself that were positive and negative. She identified the source of her drive and quality of work with her parents, mainly her father, yet also related her controlling nature with her daily sense of maintaining control in her classroom. She recognized that she has lived a somewhat privileged life and that she has not had too many struggles, the worst being a two year move away from her parents to the Midwest where her fiancé had a new job. She admitted the struggle was small compared to others yet it did make her a better person.

Brynn also emphasized the importance of setting daily goals and yearly goals. She didn’t use the words “social capital” but recognized that in order to meet those goals and have a good and successful life she needed to surround herself with “positive people” and to use people as “resources.”

At this time in her life, she said, “everything I’ve been working for the past year and a half is falling right in to place. I feel proud of myself.” In terms of her teaching job, she was very satisfied. When speaking about this she said, “I depend on my job and my happiness in my job because it’s not a job for me. If I didn’t get to be around these sweet 20 second graders, I don’t know what I would do.”

Brynn reflected on how she would like to be remembered. If people were at her funeral, she said she wanted to be thought of as, “A person who was there for people, there for kids, my family, friends and loved ones. A person who did their best and expected the best out of others . . . helping kids be happy.”

### **Esteban – Seven Years Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

Esteban 32 year old Latino third grade teacher. He was middle class, married, with one child under a year old. He was born and raised in the city where he currently works. His dad was originally from Mexico, however he does not know any Spanish. He considered himself a minority and received a \$25,000 minority scholarship to attend a local university’s teacher preparation program.

Both of Esteban’s parents had post secondary degrees and were teachers. He has three sisters, two of whom also went into teaching. Needless to say, Esteban spoke about how his parents stressed the importance of a good education. His parents also instilled in him a sense of deep respect for elders, a sense of humility, as well as a strong work ethic.

When he talked about how he would like to be remembered, he talked about how he would like his student’s parents to remember him.

I would like parents to remember me for challenging their kids. That is one of my philosophies. I was fortunate to have my last class for three years. I looped with them for 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>. In that class was one of the most gifted kids around.

Intellectually all-around but especially in math. He challenged me as a teacher to make sure I was challenging him as a student. I’ve always had a philosophy to teach to where your kids are at but until you have a kid who is exceptionally

bright, phenomenal in what he does, you don't really know. He qualified for excel but he didn't want to leave because of his peer relationships, even though that would have been a better fit for him academically. It was my job to challenge him. It really makes me intentional when looking at these kids. So I would want parents to say I really challenged their kids, whatever their levels (Esteban, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

When Esteban first started teaching, he was the only male in the entire school. Since then there are a few more however he was aware of the significant role he plays with the students due to their single parent families where male role models are scarce. Esteban was forthright when he said life has been fairly easy for him. He hadn't really experienced any large obstacles to overcome, had a great family, and was very happy in his career.

### **Jackie – Nine Years Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

Jackie was a White 35 year old teacher who taught a fourth grade class that she had looped with from their third grade year. She was raised in a mostly middle class environment with the exception of her mother's divorce from her father at the age of ten. At that point, she went through a period of living in situational poverty with her mother and two siblings. She described the situation in more detail.

We were middle class until my dad left. She hung onto the house by the skin of her teeth. We were living on very limited funds. Those were some rough years financially. We went through the food stamp phase. I remember going to the food bank (Jackie, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).



Throughout the interview, her challenges and struggles, including the years living in poverty, were a focal point. She acknowledged early in the interview that her experiences played a role in who she is and how she teaches.

Jackie described herself as being determined and caring. She believed her students knew that she truly cared for them and at the end of the day they wanted to come back because they knew she was there for them. She talked about a note she once received from a student that said, “you never give up.”

Jackie’s biggest challenge she described was living with a husband who had undergone eight surgeries in the eight years they have been married. It’s difficult for her because she is an active person and both of them realize this is not the life they had envisioned for themselves, him being in constant pain and out of a job. She said he was, “perfectly at home in front of the TV and I’m not perfectly at home.”

The way she talked about her life and how difficult it was just to deal with the home-life and then having to go to work and be there for the kids reminded me of the experience students often have dealing with their own home-life and then coming to school to get their education. She talked about how she would like to be remembered.

What I did in my time was genuine and that I did what I loved doing and that I lived on my terms to the best of my ability. (pause) That I lived and laughed and never let things stop me from living (Jackie, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

This way of being remembered appeared to be a struggle and something that she was trying to prove each and every day.

## **Karen – Thirteen Years Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

Karen was born and raised in the Southwest Washington area. She was 44 years old with two children who graduated from the same school as she did. Karen was raised in a middle class rural neighborhood with ten acres. She was the oldest of two children. She had the unique experience of being in her mother's classroom as a second grader as well as teaching alongside her mother in the same school after getting her teaching certificate. At this time, she teaches a mixed classroom with third and fourth graders.

Karen reported being raised as a tomboy. She showed horses throughout her childhood and still owns and shows five horses. Karen and her husband live on five acres.

She went to the state university for one year and dropped out after she met her husband and was pregnant with her first of two children. As her children went through kindergarten she started volunteering more and more in the classroom. It wasn't until the kindergarten teacher suggested she get her certificate that she finished her education and became a teacher alongside her mother. She talked about how her mother got her the "first job."

During the life history portion of her interview, it was often difficult to get Karen to elaborate and share stories of either her childhood or her current life. However, she did talk extensively about some of the differences in how she grew up and how her current students are growing up.

I think kids have a lot more chaos in their lives than we did when we grew up. We'd go home, go out and play, ride our bikes, build forts, and do that kind of stuff. We always had dinner together. We didn't have to worry about if mom or

dad was coming to pick us up or am I going to get dinner tonight (Karen, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

She recognized the different types of experiences that separated her from her students. When speaking about these differences, I didn't recognize any strong emotional tone but instead a matter-of-factness that I would use to characterize the entire interview.

All through her life history, she did not disclose any significant challenges in her life and after 44 years, her life continued to be fairly stable. One of her only regrets was taking so long to get into the profession. She would like to be remembered as being flexible and as someone who has a smile on their face.

### **Jeanne – Thirteen Years Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

Jeanne was a 51 year old first grade teacher who was White, upper middle class, and the fourth of five children. She has three children of her own. Her parents, both college educated, are still married and live in the house she grew up. From how Jeanne described her childhood, her parents assumed fairly traditional roles of the mom as homemaker and the dad as bread-winner. She remembers her mom playing in bridge groups and making dinner all the while waiting for dad to come home in the work carpool between five thirty and six o'clock.

Jeanne grew with parents who taught her the values of being a strong worker, being thrifty with money, the significance of a good education, and the importance of family. Specifically from her father, she remembered learning about being respectful, trying new things, and how to be non-judgmental. She heavily emphasized that he "taught by example."

She had successful school experiences as a child and young adult. She was unique from my other interviews in that her career in education was a second career. She originally graduated from the state university with a degree in agronomy, or crop science. For nine years, she worked in a seed lab.

Throughout her 13 years of teaching, she has been teaching mostly in the primary grades with several years experience teaching Reading Recovery, a program to remediate young readers not at grade level. Recognizing her ability and skills in teaching reading, she initiated a program that would cluster students who were at-risk of leaving first grade without the basic building blocks of reading that students need to have at the end of first grade. This is what she said about her most recent year of teaching.

When you're teaching mostly to those at-risk kids, they're not the ones getting left behind. You're gearing your instruction more to their ability and giving them more of a confidence boost and a better chance at being successful. This year, wow, this year it's really happened. Not just by what I've been doing but also how we've structured the classroom, having tutors in the classroom, and everyone pulling together. I'm surprised, no, really pleased with how they are looking right now (Jeanne, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

What she said interfaced directly with what she thought her purpose in life was. She stated she was meant to support the students and "give them the start I had starting school." It was obvious she cared deeply for her students and recognized the differences between her own growing up and the lives she interacted with on a daily basis.

## **Blaire – Thirty Years Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

Unfortunately during her first interview, my tape recorder failed. The notes from my journal provided the information for her profile.

Blaire was a 58 year old first grade teacher who was White, upper middle class, and married for 29 years. She comes from a military family that moved frequently across the United States. The majority of her childhood was spent in the San Francisco area. Both her parents have passed away yet she remembers them fondly as being quite successful in their careers with a heavy focus placed on getting a strong education. Her parents owned and rented houses in addition to their careers in the military. She pointed out her parents were seen as liberal. She emphasized her mother was more liberal as evidenced by renting to black people.

Her parents, as well as her grandparents, went to a prestigious state university. Her sister followed the legacy. Blaire, however, initially went to another state school to become a social worker. She said she, “always wanted to save the world.” With the degree in social work, she spent some years working on a Navajo Indian reservation learning about the struggles and challenges that population faced. After working on the reservation, she returned to school to get her teaching degree.

During her teaching experience she has been named teacher of the year as well as developing and teaching the “Read Well” reading program. Most of her teaching has been in kindergarten and first grade. She currently clusters students in her class who are low performing in kindergarten. She said, “people bring kids to be in my class.”

When asking Blaire about how she would be remembered, she talked about modeling how to have a lot of fun and how important it is to have fun in your job. She

also wanted to be remembered as having made a difference in children's lives. Lastly, she reflected about dealing with her daughter's cerebral palsy. She believed Elizabeth was given to her to learn a lesson that "everything can't be perfect and that we have to deal with that in order to be the best that we can be. We all have a gift, find what it is, and instill in people that they are ok."

**Janice – Ten Years Teaching Experience, Twenty Years Administration Experience, and an Additional Six Years Teaching Experience in Elementary Education**

Janice was 62 years old, White, and upper middle class. She has been married for 40 years and never had any children. She has been teaching fourth and fifth grade for the last six years looping with the students every two years. Janice's dad was a meat cutter when he met her mom and they raised her with traditional American values from the 1950s which included knowing right from wrong, working hard, always telling the truth, and no premarital sex. Janice's parent's solution to most problems was "go out and play."

Her parents also emphasized the importance of being a Christian. Her father didn't want her to go to college without that commitment so she was baptized during her senior year in high school. She describes her father as being successful and having a new Cadillac every year. Her father passed away early leaving her mother to live with Janice and her husband for 23 years.

One of the most interesting parts about interviewing Janice came when she spoke about going back to teaching after 20 years. She said it was "hard to spin" why she wanted to go back to teaching after being in the central office administration supervising

43 elementary principals and schools for so long. She recalls not even getting an interview after the 20 years and how she subbed long-term for half a year in order to establish her credibility once again. This is part of a story she told about an event that happened last year at her school.

I just laugh and giggle. One day, we had to close down because of a disaster. The superintendent was coming and the media and it was my hair day. I got to walk out the door because it was not glamorous to me anymore. Been there, done that, got the cert. It's just great fun to come in here. I wanted to get back to kids. I never had kids. I love kids. I love the magic. It's delicious to go in here.

Because you know, this is the most important work anybody does (Janice, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

Janice is someone who can see the big picture due to her experience. She is back in the classroom to make a difference, not for any sense of drama.

Janice said she had no regrets about her life and that if anything, she didn't know how much fun it was going to be. When asked what was most important to her now, she replied, "My relationship with the Lord God is number one, my relationship with my husband is number two, and number three is to make sure that I don't do anything to these babies that they'll remember for the rest of their life as traumatic. I had these guys for two years so I have touched their lives for two solid years and that is an awesome responsibility."

## Summary

This study is really about the people in front of the classroom, the teachers. In order to better understand the teachers, it is necessary to present the context in which the teachers work. To better meet the goal of providing context, I included brief descriptions of their schools and their schools' School Improvement Plans. The three schools chosen for the study represented three varying degrees of success with low SES students. Each of the school's principals makes every attempt to support their teachers to the best of their ability. They all agree the high stakes testing does not help create a positive school climate. By and large, the principals at each school focus on strengthening and improving relationships at their school. They hope this focus will positively affect their students and parents.

As the principals reported a shared focus on strengthening and improving relationships at their respective schools, their School Improvement Plans (SIP) had limited mention or acknowledgement of goals to support low SES White students. The SIPs neglected to address the disparities between the test scores of White middle class students and White students living in poverty. The plans mention strategies that speak to "all student populations" however this does not demonstrate the level of recognition needed to work effectively with low SES students.

The emphasis of this chapter was on the twelve teachers for this study. The teachers who participated in this study came from a wide variety of backgrounds yet represented the trends of teachers across the nation, being mostly middle-class, White and female. The teachers' experiences were unique and often unusual. The information gleaned from the teacher's life experiences will be used to further examine their skill



level of cultural proficiency as well as their use of culturally responsive practices in their classroom. Each of the teachers revealed at some point during the life history part of the interview that they were student driven and demonstrated care and concern for the students.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### UNDERSTANDING TEACHER'S LIFE HISTORIES

#### **Reasons the Teachers Entered Into the Profession**

What motivates someone to become an elementary teacher? The reasons these teachers entered the profession varied greatly. Interestingly, more than half of the teachers had experience working in elementary schools either as volunteers or educational assistants before they became teachers. Those who were educational assistants used the position as a springboard into teaching by getting their foot in the door of a particular school. Working as an educational assistant or as a substitute teacher is a strategy often used by teachers to establish relationships with the school's principal and staff. This relationship gives them an edge as teaching positions become available toward the end of the year.

Blaire and Jeanne were volunteers in their children's classroom. Blaire's daughter had cerebral palsy and Jeanne's son was deaf. Their children's maladies required them to volunteer in school to help them be successful. After their children moved into the upper grades, Blaire and Jeanne made a decision to go back to school to get their teaching certificate. This decision was primarily based upon the years they had recently spent in the classroom and how successful they felt helping other children as well as their own children.

Melissa's story about how she became a teacher was not like that of the other teachers. After Melissa graduated college, she waited tables for almost ten years before becoming a staff assistant in an elementary classroom. She had learned from a friend that

the pay was good and the hours were predictable. That experience led her back to school for a teaching certificate. Melissa talked about how she wasn't even certain if teaching was something she would continue, "if I like it this year, I'll probably come back." The career was obviously just something upon which she randomly landed.

Two teachers, Richard and Grace, talked about how they wanted to be a teachers since they were in elementary school and the influence their teachers had on them. When speaking about why he became a teacher, Richard spoke about Mr. Beard who taught third grade. He said, "Mr. Beard would make you laugh and still be able to bring the class back down to the learning. He was sincere, caring, and intelligent." Richard spoke about modeling his teaching after Mr. Beard and how the impact of his experience in Mr. Beard's classroom later influenced his decision to go into teaching. His earlier experience in school and some successful experiences working with young children in his church motivated him to return to college and get a teaching certificate. Grace also talked about the positive influences of her teachers. She spoke about her experience of being excited about reading and how important her teachers were to her.

I always had a yearning. I always good role models for teaching. Like I had this second grade teacher; there were these moments where I was able to write a book. I still have these little books. There was this one sixth grade teacher who got me really excited about reading. Those kinds of things. Making a positive impact in a child's life that possibly changes their future. Not as a hero but more of a step at a time. You know, one child (Grace, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

I wonder if the teachers Richard and Grace spoke about know that they had a major influence on the lives of their students. So much influence, that after having

teachers like the teachers they described above, they decided early in their lives to become teachers themselves.

Three teachers, Karen, David, and Esteban, were raised in a family of educators. All three initially had pushed back against the thought of becoming a teacher. Karen told me, “I would never go into teaching. Even my mother will tell you that.” As her children went through kindergarten she started volunteering more and more in the classroom. It wasn’t until the kindergarten teacher suggested she go get her teaching certificate that she finished her education and became a teacher alongside her mother. She talked about how her mother got her the “first job.” David said, “I never thought I would be a teacher but here I am.” Esteban had spent many years coaching basketball in the middle school, close to the university where he got his bachelors degree. He spent three years waiting tables after graduating and had a roommate who taught. His friend encouraged him to go back to school and get his certificate. Esteban said, “My dad always put the bug in my ear but I never thought about it. Where am I now? I guess he was right.”

Jackie talked about how she always wanted to work with kids as a pediatric nurse. After a short period of volunteering in the hospital, she talked about how she couldn’t handle seeing a child sick and hooked up to tubes. Her desire to help children prompted her to change her thinking about nursing and pursue a career in elementary education. Her reasons to change her career choice included “helping children understand that there is something out there for them.”

Janice and Brynn’s decision to teach elementary education was heavily influenced by their fathers. Janice went to college at a state university. After two years, her dad came

to visit during parent's week, sat her down, and told her she needed a job. He knew teaching was a good vocation. This is what she said about eventually becoming a teacher:

Once I started teaching I liked it because as a scientist, I could see that I could do things that would positively impact human beings and I got hooked on that. I got hooked on the challenge of figuring out how to help a kid develop and believe in themselves. You have to be nice to kids and have high expectations (Janice, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

Initially, she entered the profession because of the direction her father gave her but emerged with her own purpose beginning to assert itself. Much like Janice's father, Brynn's father determined her path. He paid for her to get her bachelor's degree and teaching certificate at the state university, his own alma mater.

### **The Role of Learned Values**

The teachers I interviewed were often raised in traditional households where the father worked and the mother stayed home to take care of the children. The teachers learned specific values from their parents including but not limited to the importance of being honest, nurturing, hardworking, and thrifty. Their experiences and the values they learned in their youth often positively impacted their teaching styles. However, their experiences and values also had negative impacts.

I often heard a distinct contrast between the values upon which the teachers were raised and the values upon which their students were being raised. These differences functioned in a way that highlighted the negative attitudes toward parents or toward children. Acknowledgement of these differences is critical to the understanding of

students living in poverty. However, highlighting the differences only created tension and distance between teachers, students, and parents. The differences did not bring these groups together.

### **Positive Role of Learned Values**

Brynn, Richard, David, and Jackie spoke about how they used their experiences and the values they learned in a positive manner. These teachers talked specifically about the importance of laughter, being nurtured, and of “tough love.” Brynn spoke about her purpose and being a teacher.

I think I was meant to be a teacher. I think I was meant to nurture children...to encourage them to want to learn and to help them make good choices in life because some kids don't make good choices and I think that it starts young. I think that it's my job to help show what I've learned to help me be successful to learn and to show that to them and to be a wife and a homemaker and a mommy and all that stuff (Brynn, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

She overlapped the role as nurturer that she learned from her parents onto her role as educator. The overlapping is harmonious and doesn't create any tension. She also wanted the students to know they could accomplish anything they set their minds to accomplish. From the following excerpt, Brynn talked about her kids and their future in college.

Because they don't get a lot of that You can go to college someday. You can get a good job too. You can fulfill your goals. You can get good grades. They might not think about it and that's my job to make sure they get that at school every day (Brynn, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Brynn was from a middle class family whose parents went to college and placed a heavy value on post secondary education. She heard from early in her life that her parents expected her to go to college. For her, this type of cheerleading from her parents seemed to be the norm. She didn't understand anything different. In her classroom, she used what she heard from her parents and repeated it to her students. This encouragement set the tone in her classroom, even though the students were only in first grade, that college and their future was important.

Richard also used his experiences in a positive manner. He strongly believed he is a lot like his dad. Most of his talk about his influences referenced his father. Richard self described himself as someone who likes to laugh and make other people laugh, someone who gives but doesn't expect anything in return, and someone who wears his heart on his sleeve. He talked about being benevolent and described his classroom as one where he wants students to laugh and to know he cares.

David reminisced about an experience he had with one of his favorite teachers, a large black teacher named Mrs. Wilson who taught second grade. It was immediately after the divorce and he remembered going through a difficult time. He was acting out in line when she came over to him, grabbed him by the arm, threw him back in line, and told him to never get of line again. He labeled this, "tough love." This is what he had to say about Mrs. Wilson's tough love.

It wasn't a negative thing. Kids need to know boundaries. Tough love isn't always bad. I knew she cared about me. She always took the time to talk to me. I knew she wanted me to do well (David, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

“Tough love” is often associated with parenting. In his classroom today, he talked about taking this role as a parent and overlapping it onto his role as teacher. The experience from second grade more than 25 years ago continued to shape his classroom today.

Jackie talked about how she inherited her kindness, patience, and willingness to help from her mom. Jackie also talked about how she wanted to work with kids. She said, “I wanted kids to see that there is something better out there for them. No matter what their life situation is. They can achieve what they set their minds to.” She recognized the way to work well with kids meant being there for them in ways like her mom was there for her.

### **Negative Role of Learned Values**

Teachers talked about the more traditional values of the American family that they learned growing up. These values included the importance of being a hard worker, thrifty with money, honest, importance of family, importance of education. When I heard these values surface throughout the interviews, the word “bootstrap” came to mind in order to classify these traditional American values. These values were the ones that supported the “anyone can succeed if they just work hard enough” kind of attitude.

Instead of using these roles in a positive way and overlapping them into their teaching, the values created a tension, illustrating or highlighting the differences that exist today from times gone by. Is this a natural tension that manifests itself with the change teacher’s perceived from yesterday’s world to today’s world? Does this tension add to the cultural disynchronization between middle class teachers and their low SES White students?



Most teachers agreed that the world has changed and nearly all of the teachers thought that the changes have been largely negative. Janice talked about the differences that exist today.

Everywhere we lived everyone had a great back yard. It's different today, the exposure kids have to everything. I mean MTV has made clones of all the little kids and the games. I don't know what's going to happen when they spend a million hours playing games. I read Nancy Drew. I thought I was Nancy Drew. I lived vicariously through those books (Janice, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

What Janice described was her world view according to how kids experience it today. The world is different. Kids do not read or play outside as much as they used to. The world is not as safe. In short, the world not only is a lot different for kids but also much worse off for them now than when the teachers grew up.

Blaire spoke about when she grew up there was a lot of competition in class and students were extremely hard working. She never met anyone who was illiterate until she moved to southern Washington. She also had this to say about how she sees today's youth compared to when she was growing up.

These kids don't do homework. The parents don't work. Things have really changed. When I grew up, there was no theft. Here, kids steal and don't understand that it's wrong. Times have changed (Blaire, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

Blaire pointed out some very awkward examples of how different the students are today compared to when she grew up. I wondered if these attitudes were part of a bigger picture between her and her class. The caring and nurturing were definitely there but underneath there was a current of blame and disappointment.

Melissa was the most inexperienced teacher I interviewed. Some may think new teachers are inherently idealistic and filled with optimism. She shared some interesting thoughts about how kids are different today from when she grew up.

I don't think kids get hurt enough both physically and emotionally. They call on us about any little thing that a child might say to them. Normally we would have had to work it out when we were kids. They want to be coddled. Playgrounds used to be made of concrete. Everything is padded now. I mean that both literally and figuratively. I'm surprised they don't wear a helmet and pads just to walk through the door (Melissa, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

I began to understand she thought kids have it easier today and that they don't work as hard as she did when she was younger. It was a peculiar paradox that the students living in poverty had it easier today.

### **Personal Experiences as Assets**

The teachers in this study came from a variety of backgrounds. Teachers came from backgrounds where they experienced situational poverty to lives where all their material needs were provided. Teachers came from families of educators as well as working class families working the typical nine to five job. One teacher was a high school dropout and one teacher in particular returned from a lengthy career in educational administration back to the classroom. The diversity of experiences amongst the twelve teachers was exceptional given the limited number of teachers interviewed.

Each teacher saw their experiences as a positive influence on how they teach and how they interact with their students. The teachers never thought about their background

hindering their responsibility to educate the young students who came mostly from low-income neighborhoods. According to the teachers, there didn't appear to be an inability to connect with their students. Teachers reflected on their experiences growing up as well as more recent experiences to help them in their teaching. Richard specifically talked about how he was influenced by the memories of his teachers and the power structures of his family when he was growing up.

I had some really great teachers. Mr. Beard in fourth grade, Mr. Brighten my seventh grade English teacher, Mr. Bechtky my social studies teacher, Mr. Chrysler in high school, Mrs. Wilcox, seventh grade math. They loved what they did. The ones who loved what they did I looked at that and thought, WOW! I hope I have a job like that someday where I really love what I'm doing. That's what I try to do in here. I bring that into my room. It's like I channel them. Every morning I just try to remember them and what they were like and try to bring that into my teaching. How Mr. Bechtky used big words, how Mr. Beard made the kids laugh. How Mrs. Wilcox explained math, even to the kid who didn't get it. She would show them three ways. And the kid would pick, ah, this one works for me. So yeah, I use that a lot. I use their teachings a lot . . .

I hear my parents come out in my voice to my kids. Yeah, when I'm just teaching social skills like respecting one another. We had a big talk today about insubordination today, and that's a big word. I had to define what that means. I used a military example of someone who's a captain and someone who's a Sergeant, someone who is above this private. You know, that's how I was raised and I try to instill that in my students (Richard, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

Richard had vivid memories of his teachers and how they taught. He understood, from his experiences with teachers, how important it was for teachers to love what they are doing and how important it was to mix academics with making school fun. At the same time, he established a traditional classroom that was based on power structures where the students were certainly subordinates to the teacher. He was raised with this structure and implemented it in his classroom.

Karen talked about her more recent connections with friends. Her experiences influence her teaching in different ways and each provides a context that helps her understand students.

We all have connections to people who may be in bad situations. I think you just have to put yourself in their place and think about what they're going through . . . I think you have to think about where they're at in order to relate to them. I just think about all the people I know and the relationships that I have. I mean, I have one friend who is Pierce County's number one DUI. If I have a kid who comes in and says his dad just got a ticket I can ask how do you feel about that because I know about that too (Karen, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

She relates her experiences with her everyday friends and family to how she is able to connect with her kids even though she doesn't share a similar background with her students. Her experiences enhanced her abilities to work with low-income students.

Grace didn't receive her high school diploma. She described how that experience, as well as others experiences, shaped how she ran her classroom as well as related to students. The challenges she faced as a young person in her late teens shaped her thinking and turned into assets she used as a teacher at Mark Twain.

It has a huge effect. I had circumstances I could not control and those circumstances made me make choices that probably weren't good decisions. But you can always make changes for the better. So I think that when I teach, it's kind of like instilling that sense of excitement or where is this going to take you? Where is this learning going to take you? Why are you learning? There's a purpose. You can just let your bad choices consume you or you can move on and go forward. That whole thread is in my classroom . . .

I've been hungry. I've been places. I've seen things. My mother's an alcoholic so I can identify with kids with parents with substance abuse. So things like that just make me who I am. Sure, there are things I'm still green on but as a whole, I can identify (Grace, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

Janice grew up in a middle class family. She didn't have experience with poverty however her siblings school experiences are what she remembered when thinking about how her personal experiences influence her teaching.

It's amazing. More than I thought. I have a younger sister who was pulled out and it was sheer hell. So I like not having pull-out programs. I also work very hard not to have Jeannies (her sister). Which means a lot of the kids who are remedial are because we did a crappy job. We as a school system. We created them. So, someone created Jeannie too. So I work very hard if they're low in reading to move them as far as I can. I figure out how they learn to read because it's not one right way gets the job done. So that's greatly influenced me to try to delete the Jeannies in my world. The second is my older brother. He was gifted but hated school. Couldn't stand it. Wouldn't play the game of school. It would always say

on his report card, “Jerry can do better.” And my mom would say, don’t ever do that to a parent. A parent cannot go in there and fix it. You need to figure out as the teacher how to fix it and then tell the parent what the plan is and then or maybe what they can help do. But do not say Jerry doesn’t pay attention because the parent isn’t in there. And the parents in their way do the very best they can. And they don’t need me telling them how to re-parent. I don’t agree when the teachers want to give the parents more parenting classes. I think we just take whoever comes in that door and then we just figure out how to get’er done. So really, my older brother and younger sister have really impacted me. So when I have a high kid or a kid who doesn’t want to play the game, I say to myself, do they have to do it? Can they do it in a different way? Could I teach them reading through whatever they’re interested in. Cause I don’t want a brilliant kid who hates playing school (Janice, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

The negative experiences of her siblings impacted her thinking. Instead of what would be effective, she used the memories of her siblings to help her with what to avoid when teaching students. Janice didn’t mention low-income students specifically but she had intimate knowledge of how a parent felt when the focus was placed on them and their parenting skills rather than what the school or teacher could do to help their students succeed.

Esteban’s dad taught him about differences in people. Esteban was the only minority in the study. He had the very singular experience of going to Mexico every other year to visit relatives. He spoke about how those experiences shaped his thinking and helped him reach out.

I feel it has a lot to do with my dad's background. Every two years, I'd get to go down to Seguarro to spend time with my grandma, my cousins, my aunts, and uncles. They came from a really, really impoverished lifestyle. My uncles house wasn't really a house just a single-wide trailer. They grew up in poverty, and still are. Just being around that whole culture, every summer every other year. I didn't really feel I was a part of it but still I didn't look down upon it. We played with just sticks and rocks. Just being around them and seeing how they lived. I kind of always think back to them and some of the luxuries that I had that they never had so I can relate to my kids using that part of my family (Esteban, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

He recognized the differences now as an adult but as a child, he didn't really see the differences as being less than. The memories are clear for Esteban and something he uses quite often when working with his students who are living in poverty.

David talked in particular about his experience growing up with divorce and how he used that experience to work with kids who also experience divorce.

From my life experience, I can look at a child and relate. I see a child that is living with a single parent and is struggling. I can relate to that. I spent a time in my life when I dealt with that and the feeling of missing the parents how hard that is.

We're not all that different, on a different level we all have days when our problems affect how we feel (David, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

Many students who live in low-income neighborhoods are living with just one parent.

David understood that divorce impacts how his students are feeling on any given day.

Teachers can use their experiences to empathize with students. They don't have to be

poor to know that having one parent around is difficult and can make a student feel angry, hurt, and distracted.

Teachers can use their life experiences in a variety of ways to help frame how they teach. Regardless of how they were raised or what kinds of households they came from, the teachers were able to use their life experiences in a positive way. What does this say about the lack of cultural synchronization between middle-class teachers and their low-income students? Certainly most middle class teachers, like Jeanne and Esteban, have not had to buy groceries with food stamps or experience the fear of having the electricity turned off. This lack of personal experience or personal struggle did not mean that their middle class experiences had no value.

On the contrary, their experiences had value to each and every teacher in the study. Brynn, who grew up in a middle class family, said, “All things my parents instilled in me I want to instill in them because I’ve been successful and I want them to be successful too.” This type of positive relationship between who teachers are and what they do existed in every teacher interviewed. Curiously, there weren’t any teachers who talked about how their lack of experience with poverty hindered them in the classroom.

## **Summary**

Some teachers used the values transmitted to them in their youth to positively impact their classrooms. At the same time, I heard how some of the values they learned led them to blame students for their shortcomings or misunderstand their student’s needs. The teachers have the difficult task of reconciling their care and concern for their students with their perceptions of where their students are coming from and the values that they



bring into the classroom. In effect, they struggle against the very cultural reproduction that exists in the world outside of schools (McLaren, 1998).

By and large, the teachers from this study mirrored the demographic of teachers in the United States, being White, middle-class, monolingual women (Nieto, 2003). However, after interviewing the teachers at length, each had unique experiences that shaped who they were and how they taught. The teachers felt their life experiences, whether they lived in a dysfunctional, divorced, two-parent or “traditional” family, were assets in their work. Given that they came from varying backgrounds, it is safe to say it does not take a specific type of person or particular set of experiences to be a successful elementary school teacher. Honoring one’s history, whatever it is, is very important, however. In fact, it is an advantage to have elementary school teachers with a wide variety of experiences, dispositions, and pedagogical practices, because the students with whom they work come from a variety of experiences as well.

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**THE CULTURALLY UNSKILLED TEACHER VERSUS THE CULTURALLY**  
**ADEPT TEACHER**

More than ever before, the increasing diversity in our schools challenges teachers to be socially competent in ways that show mutual understanding, respect, concern, and justice for students and families who are culturally unlike them. Culturally proficient teachers first look at themselves, how their backgrounds impact their way of thinking, and how their thinking impacts their understanding of and interactions with diverse populations (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbelljones, 2005). Culturally proficient teachers examine their personal values and behaviors and realize it is themselves who adapt their practices to meet the needs of the students and the community they serve. The focus shifts from *them*, being the students and their families, to *us* meaning the teachers and schools.

In the second chapter, I discussed the cultural proficiency continuum and how certain beliefs and actions suggest a tolerance for diversity or a transformation for equity. In this chapter, I analyzed teacher talk to determine if there were indications teachers addressed issues of cultural proficiency or struggled with their cultural proficiency. Early in the analysis, most teachers in the study spoke about attitudes and behaviors that could be classified across the cultural proficiency continuum in several categories. However, upon closer examination of the interviews, I was able to use their talk to place them exclusively into two fundamental levels of cultural proficiency, the culturally unskilled teacher versus the culturally adept teacher (Figure 4). Teachers whose talk was primarily

indicative of cultural destructiveness, incapacity, or color blindness were described as culturally unskilled teachers. Teachers whose talk was more indicative of cultural pre-competence, competence, or proficiency were described as culturally adept teachers.

<b>THE CULTURALLY UNSKILLED TEACHER</b>	<b>THE CULTURALLY ADEPT TEACHER</b>
<p><b>Tolerance for Diversity</b>  <i>Demographics are viewed as a challenge or entirely neglected. Students and parents are expected to adapt to middle-class norms. Information merely added to existing policies, procedures, and practices. The focus is on them.</i></p>	<p><b>Transformation for Equity</b>  <i>Demographics are used to inform policy and practice. Diversity is esteemed and respected. Strengths are leveraged. Information provokes significant changes to policies, procedures, and practices. The focus is on us and on our practice.</i></p>
<p>Karen  Richard  Jill  Melissa  Brynn</p>	<p>Grace  Blaire  Jeanne  Jackie  Esteban  Janice  David</p>

Figure 4: Two Fundamental Level of Cultural Proficiency for Teachers. Adapted from *Standards for Leadership Behavior, Tolerance Versus Equity* (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbelljones, 2005).

I described five teachers from this study as culturally unskilled or lacking the necessary skills to be culturally proficient when working with low SES White students. Karen, Richard, Jill, Melissa, and Brynn talked about attitudes and behaviors that would indicate cultural destructiveness, culturally incapacity, or cultural color blindness. On the opposite side in the figure, seven teachers, Grace, Blaire, Jeanne, Jackie, Esteban, Janice, and David possessed levels of cultural proficiency that indicated they were culturally adept when working with low SES White students.

Before moving to the analysis of teacher talk, it is important to emphasize that each teacher, regardless of skill level, cared deeply for students. Each teacher achieved his or her level of cultural proficiency much like any skill, by specific instruction or through life experience. I learned that regardless of the fact that low SES students made up approximately fifty percent or more of the total population in their classrooms, most of the teachers in this study explained that they had not been adequately trained to work with students and families living in poverty. One teacher, Jill, talked about her first year working at Marshall Falls and her lack of training.

You're so shell shocked your first year of teaching. From my experience, I had no way to cope with what was going on. I immediately became my mother. I started doing the things that did not work between me and my mother, lecture, talking loudly, being an authoritarian. Your first year is really difficult (Jill, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Since her first year, Jill has read an article by Ruby Payne and has seen Donna Beegle at a seminar. Richard, Grace, Karen, David, and Jackie had also read either an article a book by Ruby Payne. Most teachers in this study were ill equipped to work with low SES students. They had received little or no training and primarily had to rely on firsthand experiences in the classroom.

The cultural proficiency continuum (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbelljones, 2005) remains the skeleton for organizing the data under the two broader themes of culturally unskilled and culturally adept teachers. Focusing teacher talk into two skill levels of cultural proficiency gives the reader a clearer path to understanding how teachers are thinking about diversity, in terms of socioeconomic status. I often found the talk of two

teachers similar in content. For example, the content in Karen and Richard's interviews was more indicative of cultural destructiveness. Rather than addressing each individual separately in my analysis and findings, I grouped them together.

Once again, it is important to note that this is an analysis of teacher talk from interviews and not from observations of their actual practice in the classroom. The findings in this chapter were not evidenced using classroom observations. The findings in the analysis are strictly from my interpretation of the data from teacher interviews.

Furthermore, I examined the data interwoven with the analysis to determine whether teachers were merely tolerant of diversity or transforming towards equity when working with low SES non-minority students. The analysis always centered around three important aspects of this complex question: (1) were teachers thinking about demographics as a challenge or were demographics informing their practice, (2) were low SES students thought of in terms of stereotypes or were they esteemed in the classroom, and (3) were teachers thinking about the changes that students and families needed to make in order to be successful or the changes that they had to make for their low SES White students?

### **The Culturally Unskilled Teacher – Karen and Richard**

Culturally unskilled teachers often think in ways that indicate cultural destructiveness. Cultural destructiveness is any action that negates, disparages, or purges cultural practices or expressions of culture that that differ from your own: it may be manifested through an organization's policies and practices or through an individual's assumptions and behaviors (Lindsey & Terrell, 2003). During my interviews with

teachers, I listened to several episodes of teacher talk that disparaged students and their families living in poverty. Whether intentional or not, these culturally destructive behaviors have the effect of denying legitimacy to low SES students in our predominantly White middle class culture.

One teacher, Karen, viewed her students through a middle class lens. She had no life experience with the challenges of poverty. When speaking about how she knew a student was low SES she used stereotypes and talked disparagingly about them.

They come to school unclean. They wear the same clothes everyday. We had one who smelled pretty bad. Poor hygiene. They all have their video games though, and new T.V.s they get and yet they don't have enough to get their lunch (Karen, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

She believed these students were taking advantage of the system because they were not able to pay for lunch but had the latest electronic toy. It was easy for Karen to negate behaviors with which she did not relate. She followed a similar line of thinking when she talked about her students who were suspended. She said, "Then you see them riding their bikes up and down the road."

It was also evident that Karen had low expectations of her students and didn't want to be blamed in the future for any low test scores. At the beginning of the year, she went in to talk to Beverly, her principal, and said, "I'm warning you right now, my scores aren't going to be high." Karen thought of a student's readiness to learn in terms of how students performed in the past and said, "They used to come in ready to learn." These two comments together implied that a new hardship had been placed on her. She focused on students' issues and problems rather than solutions she could provide.

Further into the interview, Karen minimized the struggles that parents in poverty face. “Parents can’t get them to do homework. It’s not that hard. I think a lot of the m actually run their households,” she said, explaining her perception of parents, their parenting skills, and who she thinks is in charge in her students’ homes. Overall, when she talked about students living in poverty, the tone of her interview was negative and disapproving.

Richard also demonstrated thinking that would be considered insensitive and culturally unskilled. I was surprised to hear what he thought about the families of students living in poverty.

I think another thing is just being careful what you do and what you say around them. I mean, some of those parents are I hate to say this looking to make a buck. You know in our very litigious world today it’s not uncommon for a kid to go home and say well my teacher he grabbed me today. When the teacher did but it was in a “I just need to move you here” type of thing and then it gets twisted at home and they threaten to sue. You know, I’ve been worried about that sometimes by a few parents (Richard, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

This talk focused on the ability of a family with a low SES student to extort money from a system motivated by its low-income or working class position. Richard, at times, viewed these students as a direct threat to him. This excerpt from Richard’s second interview illustrated culturally unskilled behavior.

Richard grew up in an affluent family, yet considered himself to be middle class. He reflected on how he was raised and used that perspective to frame his teaching and expectations.

After three days, I wanted to quit. Sorry, I can't do this. Made me stronger in classroom management. I'm not responsible for how they behave. It's not their fault. It's the environment. Helps me to take a step back, I have come from this affluent family. I try to tell them if they work hard, they can have anything you want. They can break the cycle (Richard, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

He recognized the difference between growing up affluent and growing up poor. This awareness would have been an asset to him. However it was his experience living in an affluent family that impacted his thinking about a person's ability to "make it" just because they "work hard." His intentions were good, but the outcome was not positive.

He didn't understand that families living in poverty are hardworking. They often work two or three jobs. The families who are represented in his classroom have a difficult time hearing if they just "work hard" they will make it because this isn't happening for them. Because it isn't happening for them, they often blame themselves for their situation and feel there is something ultimately wrong with them (Beegle, 2007). This seemed to be an example of someone from the middle class projecting their values on the working class and poor and perhaps an example of covert inferiority messages (Beegle, 2007).

Further into the interview, he described his frustration with the lack of communication with a family and the parents' inability to help their child complete homework.

Lack of communication is a bummer for me. I've assigned homework sometimes and it'll come back with a note saying they don't know how to do this. And that's kind of frustrating because it's second-grade math or spelling or whatnot (Richard, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).



His frame of thinking remained oriented toward middle class values and experiences. In his middle class social status, most adults know how to do second-grade math and spelling. He didn't take into account that families living in poverty may not have had equal opportunities in their educational experiences. Their educations may not have included second-grade math or spelling. What could he have done to bridge the gap?

Richard's culturally unskilled perspectives of low SES White students were based on stereotypes of low-income families. He made a list about how he thinks about kids in poverty and described low SES student's futures.

Needy, hugging in class, constant attention, perform poorly, haven't been focused, don't take responsibility, don't value education, some very bright but some very lazy . . .

I feel a couple have a shot. Some are going to break the mold. Some are going to be cyclic either grow up and drop out and they're going to get pregnant early on and it's just going to start all over again, in fact I have one girl, she's just the epitome of low socioeconomic family. Mom is working fast food and she's missed over 70% of her days in school. School isn't important to her. Where is she going to be in four years? A drop out, starting the cycle all over again and get pregnant unless someone could get through and help her realize the importance of school (Richard, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

In reality, being poor and being lazy are mutually inclusive. This seemed to be his assumption. Also, being poor and not valuing education don't necessarily go hand in hand. Furthermore, being poor and getting pregnant early are not directly related. Was the

impact of his stereotyping evident among his students, especially the little girl he described?

### **The Culturally Unskilled Teacher – Jill**

A culturally unskilled teacher also thinks in ways that are indicative of cultural incapacity. Cultural incapacity is any action that elevates the superiority of one's own cultural values and beliefs while suppressing cultures that are different. Sleeter (1996) says that teachers undercut parents from working class or poor families. They concentrate on the skills and abilities of parents, rather than finding ways to share power and work collaboratively. The following excerpt from Jill clearly illustrates this.

Mom tired, would say “yes” but not. You hear them “yessing” you but it’s really hard for me to believe that when I say they’re falling behind in reading if you could just listen to them read once a night if you’re cooking dinner or maybe after he brushes his teeth. “Oh yeah, yeah, we do it all the time” and it’s kinda hard to believe . . .

families are willing but no follow through with things they said they would do. They wouldn’t follow through. If they did, their daughter would have been a better reader. As it was, she couldn’t read a lick (Jill, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

In Jill’s estimation, the reason for student’s inability to achieve rested upon the shoulders of the parents and not with the teachers or the school systems. The teachers’ talk was patronizing and not sympathetic. Most teachers linked low SES students and poverty to lack of parent support and lack of homework. Instead of trying to change the students and what they are doing with homework, teachers can rethink their policies

about homework and how they can be adapted to meet the needs of their unique population. This type of change would indicate a more culturally adept teacher who is using demographics to inform his or her practice.

### **The Culturally Unskilled Teacher – Melissa and Brynn**

Culturally unskilled teachers will also exhibit aspects of cultural color blindness. Cultural color blindness exists in classrooms when teachers fail to recognize the differences that exist between their low SES students and students from the dominant White, middle-class culture. Lack of differentiation occurs when teachers are blind to the differences and all students are treated the same. The failure to recognize significant differences between the macro-culture and the culture of poverty was evident in teacher talk. Although both Melissa and Brynn recognized that they had students in their classrooms who were living in poverty, they did not successfully differentiate instruction or expectations.

Teachers used several methods of discovery to identify their low SES students. Some teachers looped with their students and over time, they began to understand the student's background and had close relationships with their families. Other teachers closely watched to see if students were participating in the free and reduced lunch program. Yet other teachers, however, were uncertain how to identify their low-income students or didn't use the information available to them.

Often, when teachers grew up in mostly middle class families, they lacked the skills to understand and describe their low SES non-minority students. They continued to ignore the information before them or link deficit behaviors to living in poverty. They

neglected to inquire further into their students' lives and instead made assumptions based upon stereotypes. Melissa talked about being from a country school in the 1970s and 1980s and about how nobody differentiated back then. She knew there were poor kids but they were all treated the same. In her experience, everyone was treated equally. This experience spilled over into her classroom. She had this to say when asked about how she knew who the low SES students were in her room.

It's hard for me to know. I don't know if some of these kids are low-income. Like I know one of my kids had a check bounce. I don't really know. I know there's the lunch forms they do at the beginning of the year but I don't really pay attention to whether they're getting free and reduced lunch or not . . .

sometimes you just assume, that's sad to say, based on if they're coming to school dirty and if they're not wearing clean clothes, sometimes if nobody seems to care enough to brush their hair in the morning. It usually goes hand in hand (Melissa, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

This passage from Melissa implied she believed there was a direct relationship between bouncing checks, being dirty or unkempt, and being poor. This passage also implied that parents who are living in poverty don't care enough to brush their children's hair in the morning. The parent behavior was attributed to not caring rather than other factors that families in poverty face. Poverty and not caring do not go hand in hand. This view of low SES students was disparaging and focused on negative stereotypes.

Brynn was also raised in a middle class household and didn't think that being low SES mattered in her classroom. Differentiating for low SES students is not something she consciously does. How can a teacher differentiate if she is not able to recognize the

differences that exist in the classroom? In effect, she is culturally blind to students living in poverty. This way of thinking is culturally unskilled and was evident in her classroom.

I really have no idea who the low-income students are. I really don't think about that when I'm teaching the kids. I've never thought about their income playing into that really (Brynn, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Brynn later hinted at the differences that exist but then neglected or looked past them when they began to think about how best to teach their low SES students. Brynn talked about the differences in her life and the student's and what she was willing to do.

These kids are a little bit different from the kids you are used to and I, oh, I don't care, it's alright, oh no, I can look past that. I can. You can, you can a lot and still have those high expectations that work for any child and treat them as individuals and not look down upon them. All of that stuff (Brynn, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

From her comments, she appeared unskilled in discovering that low SES students did indeed present different needs that could be used to inform her practices. Teachers are not meant to look past their students. I also questioned her idea of high expectations and what it meant. In the preceding excerpt, "high expectations" seemed more like an educational buzzword than a reality.

When teachers pay attention to whether students are getting free and reduced lunches they can begin thinking specifically about strategies that may be appropriate for students living in poverty. Culturally blind teachers often emphasize the fact that they don't treat their kids living in poverty different from any other student in their classroom. This lack of understanding does not work to the benefit of their low SES kids who need differentiation to maximize their learning. If teachers like Melissa are saying, "I don't

know that I do anything different for them per se” are in classrooms, does this mean that they have no understanding of their students and teach them the same as middle class students?

### **The Culturally Adept Teacher and Cultural Proficiency**

I identified Grace, Blaire, Jeanne, Jackie, Esteban, Janice, and David as culturally adept teachers in their work with low SES White students. The behaviors and attitudes demonstrated in their interviews are indicative of cultural proficiency, specifically talk that centered around four critical characteristics of cultural proficiency: (1) acknowledging privileges and respecting class-based differences, (2) knowing cultural resources and values of poor students, (3) teacher and school focused challenges, and (4) adapting practices to build bridges. I recognized teachers possessing skills in these specific areas as culturally adept.

Cultural proficiency begins by interacting with other cultural groups in ways that recognize and value their differences. Knowledge of these differences motivates teachers to assess their own skills and expand their knowledge and resources. Ultimately, this knowing causes them to adapt their attitudes and teaching behaviors (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbelljones, 2005).

Teachers who are culturally proficient also acknowledge their own privileges to better understand the relationship and build bridges between themselves and their low-income or working-class students. Teachers who are culturally proficient also with a positive perspective and consistently talk about the assets of low SES White students.

When talking about challenges, the focus is on the teachers' practices and not on the deficits of low SES students or the skills and abilities of their parents. This focus marks a subtle shift in thinking from a tolerance for diversity to a transformation for equity. In a culturally competent classroom, teachers adapt their practices. When examining who sits in the seats in their classroom, teachers will see the differences that exist and teach to each individual's abilities. The aim is not to set the bar equally for all but to move each individual equally in a positive direction. This individual consideration and differentiation for low SES students exists in culturally competent classrooms.

### **The Culturally Adept Teacher – Grace and Blaire**

Culturally teachers look within first to see who they are and then look outside to see with whom they are working. When addressing the cultural differences, it is important to name the differences that exist and then claim the differences. (Lyndsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003). One teacher, who was in a bi-racial marriage, used that experience to talk about differences between cultures.

Just in my life experience I can see that. My husband is black. I figured out, wow, there's just some things that are easier for me. There are. I think I'm comparing because I think it's a kind of naiveté. A huge proportion of teachers are White and so of course there's going to be a wonder-eyed feeling. The most you can do is become aware. You can never go in their shoes but you can step out and think about it and learn (Grace, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Some teachers seem to have the ability to reflect upon their own privilege and understand that lives aren't all lived equally. Grace made the connection between racial awareness

and class awareness. She also recognized that the population of teachers may not have very many things in common with different cultures and that it is best to start by just taking the time to think about these complex ideas. Actions will follow.

Grace, who was a high school dropout, also spoke about her challenges from the teacher and school perspective.

Not enough one-on-one time with the kids. In my experience, I've seen a correlation with low-income and being low academically and needing intensive interventions. When you have 27 kids, as a teacher, that's probably the hardest part. You are spread so thin. It's not being able to be next to them . . .

things they come in the classroom with that you have no control over. The stories you hear. It's hard to hear those stories. They don't have a coat or they're hungry or they've moved or are going to leaving you soon to another district. A thousand stories like that. You have no control over that. These poor kids. Their minds have to be on academics but their first hierarchy isn't getting filled (Grace, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

She lamented the fact that she was under-resourced as a teacher and had no control over what happened outside her classroom. This was a similar response from quite a few of the culturally adept teachers.

Blaire, who came from a fairly affluent family, named and claimed her differences when she readily acknowledged that she was "lucky to be born in that environment." She also said, "I've learned to walk in their shoes and not judge them. I give them second chances." She understood the significance of these differences and how



her experiences related to her current practices. In a sense, she initiated a transformation from a tolerance for diversity viewpoint to a transformation for equity viewpoint.

Some teachers in this study recognized some of the cultural resources and values that students who lived in poverty brought with them to school. Beegle (2007) states, “Just like people in privilege, people from poverty are proud of certain values they hold – relationships, loyalty, putting people before money, time, or objects, and pride in their ingenuity and resourcefulness – and rightly so.” Blaire reported that students who lived in poverty came with the following assets, they “have a sense of what’s real, know what it means to struggle, and are easier to work with.”

### **The Culturally Adept Teacher – Jeanne, Jackie, and Esteban**

Most teachers struggled with getting parents involved and into their classroom during parent nights or during the day to volunteer. About her own experience, Jeanne said, “Parents are less involved with me. I try to balance that with putting myself in their position and their struggling to get to their job.” Jeanne grew up in a fairly mainstream middle-class family and neighborhood. She was able to adjust her thinking and instead of blaming the parent, she made it her job to see the problem from another perspective. In essence, she placed the focus on her practice.

When talking about deficits, Jeanne used her experiences with and deeper understanding of low-income students to divert the emphasis away from the deficits toward the positive.

I’m aware that they come in with deficits in parent interactions, I know that they have the intelligence just not the practice or exposure so they “look at-risk” but

really aren't. All they need is some structured time and teaching then they're off and rolling and on their way (Jeanne, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

She was able to name the differences in a positive manner so that the students were respected. In effect, she was able to see through the stereotypes.

Two teachers, Jackie and Esteban, had a special awareness of their low SES students. They both understood that low SES students have needs beyond academics and that it was possible for them to meet these needs. They understood that this was part of their career in terms of helping children succeed. This is what they both said about building bridges to meet student's needs.

He's physically the cutest kid ever but he looks more poor now than he did last year. You know how sometimes poor kids have that dark circles under their eyes they just haven't had that nutrition. And he's a real pale skinned kind of kid and I didn't notice that last year he was just another kid but it's allergy season and his little eyes are red all the time and one of the ways we've helped him is buy allergy medicine because you know if you were on a limited income you don't go to Walgreens and buy allergy medicine (Jackie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

I worked really hard at building relationships. There really has to be a trust there. A lot of times kids in poverty, you know, they're made fun of for whatever reasons. Kids can be cruel at times. And so it's just letting them know they're safe here. And I'm going to try to meet their needs whatever their needs are. If they need an extra snack someday I'm going to try to find them something. If they need extra supplies or if they need someone to talk to. Families at home have lots

of stressors that come in here and sometimes that affects them. I just want this to be a safe place. Forget about academics for a little while. Let's just get you comfortable. Whatever situation you're coming from, I'm someone you can trust (Esteban, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

### **The Culturally Adept Teacher – Janice and David**

Janice demonstrated high levels of cultural proficiency. She talked about respect, her life history, and how she has been able to change her attitude. She said, "I have respect for them, but for the grace of god, I could be here." This is what she had to say about the evolution of her thinking.

I used to have stereotypes about them. I used to think their parents weren't good and they were pretty low but I've changed based on my experience. I know now a lot have health issues and some have been subjected to tragedy. I've changed my attitude totally towards them. There are many just as consequences of daddy walking out. I was judgmental about CDs on their wish list but I haven't walked in their shoes (Janice, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

It was evident that at one point in her career she framed her line of thinking and her practices with a middle-class perspective. This would have been expected. However, her administrative experiences with schools and how they worked with students and families living in poverty helped transform her thinking from a culturally destructive point of view to a more culturally competent point of view. She had begun the transformation for equity. Toward the end of the interview, she said, "The kids in this building are respected

and honored. It does not matter what their background is.” What she said confirmed her skills in cultural proficiency.

Janice agreed with other teachers who believed students who have had to struggle economically have a heightened sense of how to navigate the world around them. This is what she said when she was asked about her student’s futures.

I don’t see gloom or doom at all. I think the kids will do fine who are poor. I think that if they stay alive . . . I think that in a way it’s to their benefit because they’re not out there doing some of the stuff some of the more affluent kids are doing (Janice, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Janice also had experiences where she reached out beyond the scope of academics to help her low SES students and their families. She knew that she was in a position to help and that the families were in need of this help. Her intentions were to help her low SES non-minority students access what her middle class students had in their everyday lives.

The whole family was out and they were walking on a railroad trestle. And the train came and killed the dad. And now mom lives in government subsidized houses and is totally on the government and she’s depressed every day. So his little world is very narrow but he’ll talk to me about the way it was before when daddy was alive. He’s made enormous growth too. He’s got a plate in his brain and I know part of the brain that was impacted was mathematics and I’ve literally watched that brain get better. He loves being in the small groups and I have some senior citizen volunteers that come in and work with him and he loves that. At the beginning of the year he wouldn’t do anything for any work. So I said, if he earned points then I would take him to get a book. I had taken him to get books

before and sometimes I took him to McDonald or buy him toys. And sometimes my husband and I give the family gift cards (Janice, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

David also possessed strong skills in cultural proficiency. When asked about what he thought about low SES students, David began his descriptions with the words, “worldly, bright, capable, and smart.” Teachers found it helpful to know about parent’s cultural attitudes toward school and how these attitudes differed from those of the middle class teachers. David knew that “getting the parent’s trust” was extremely important and that some low SES families believe that an “us against them mentality” prevails in society. They understood that school had not been a good experience for their families and that these feelings were barriers that the school needed to find ways to overcome.

David also talked at length about the struggles that he faced in his school and his district. He understood that there were teachers in his school who sometimes put themselves first. He stated, “teachers must support parents, students, and then teachers... teachers think opposite.” Next, he described in detail how the fails to provide supports for his low SES students.

I struggle with that . . . ELL support, Special Ed support, but you don’t see poverty support, there’s no term for it because it doesn’t exist. The support they have is teachers working hard and that’s it . . .

the district is constantly changing it’s curriculums every two or three years. Last year we got this new literacy program and they just dropped off the boxes of books and said, “Here ya’ go” (David, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

He was very upset about the district’s practice of assigning assistant principals to schools in more affluent areas based on the numbers of students in attendance. He couldn’t

comprehend how schools only received supports based on population rather than needs. He asked a critical question that only the superintendent could answer, “Is it more important for that principal to be there for these high need kids or is it more important for that principal to be there for those high needs parents?” Did David recognize these district shortcomings because his dad was a principal? He had a natural way of looking at the issue of poverty from a system’s perspective rather than that of someone in the trenches.

Low SES students are often challenged with problems such as food insufficiency, fewer family resources, and in extreme cases, homelessness. David was well aware of the adaptations he would need to make as he built bridges between the school’s systems and student’s backgrounds. In the following excerpts from David, he talked about the ways living in poverty impacted his students.

It’s a tough one. It’s hard because you hear a lot of teachers, it’s easy to blame the family and parents but a lot of them are single parents and they’re struggling just to put food on their table. I think a lot of them need more support. You know, government support. I think a lot of them are doing the most they can. You know some of them are on drugs but I’m not talking about those families. I’m talking about the ones who are working hard and who are trying to raise a family . . .

I saw some issues with kids living in poverty. I had one kid living in a motel or hotel because he didn’t have a stable place to live. I found out he wasn’t eating lunch. He would bring lunch but it usually wasn’t much. I asked him about it and he said his parents didn’t have a lot of money. I wanted to send him to the office to get a free and reduced lunch form but who wants to go the office and do that?

So I went and picked up the form for him and helped him fill it out. All he really needed to do was get his parent's signature on it. So I got him on free and reduced lunch and now he looks forward to lunch time. They punch in id numbers so nobody even really knows he's on free and reduced lunch (David, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

## **Summary**

Beegle (2007) states, "Lack of money often incapacitates people in unforeseen or inequitable ways." There are many structures in place that deny students in poverty the support they need by punishing them for things that are out of their control. Schools are supposed to be places where students feel safe and are cared for. For the most part, this is true. In some cases, however, institutional punitive structures exist to the detriment of students. Teachers who are thinking in terms of equity versus tolerance don't allow a student's economical resources determine whether low SES students will be allowed certain privileges like recess. Preventing the students who don't finish homework from taking recess is a common practice. What do you call homework if you don't have a home? Janice recognized these types of punitive structures existed when she talked about principals and teachers that she used to supervise and how they treated low-income students.

The kids never have school supplies. Never has a snack. They never bring you a check for lunch. They wear the exact same clothes every single day. I'm very sensitive to that. We have tons of school supplies, so we always have them down here. I always hated when the principal or the teacher would beat up the kid

because they didn't have a folder or something. We're public schools. By law, we should always give them all that stuff (Janice, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Teachers recognized other ways that students were impacted by poverty such as not having reliable transportation, a phone, or medical insurance. Blaire summarized the situation poignantly. Some of her students' basic needs for food, drink, and shelter were not being met. "And how can you do it? Think about Maslow? How can you come to school, have friends, and learn when your very basic needs aren't met?"

Investigating teachers' cultural proficiency and whether a tolerance for diversity or transformation for equity exists was a complex assignment. When examining the range of attitudes and thoughts teachers possessed and the range of behaviors they exhibited, it was difficult to assess a teacher and describe him or her as either culturally unskilled or culturally adept. Several teachers had very narrow and pessimistic views of low SES students and several teachers were open-minded and had positive views and positive outlooks for their low-income students.

The question still remains, "Are teachers merely tolerating diversity or transforming for equity?" This is a complicated question to answer. One teacher, Janice, specifically talked about a transformation at sometime in her career. That transformation was evident in her talk about kids and families in poverty. Each of the remaining culturally adept teachers showed some aspects of being transformed as they continued to work with their low SES students.

Undoubtedly, students and families who are living in poverty have unique challenges and needs. Balancing understanding with high expectations to help these students grow is the expectation for teachers. Nevertheless, teachers grappled with this



balance, even teachers who were considered to be culturally unskilled. Richard described his own struggles.

They just do lazy work. They try and cut corners and it's so prevalent in here that even with these high kids they cut corners and get lazy and it drives me nuts and I just want to say you know what, screw it. I'm done. What's the point of trying to hold these kids to this level if they don't want to jump to that level but then it comes back to that understanding. They're only little kids, I'm selling them short (Richard, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

In conclusion, the teachers genuinely cared for their students. Regardless of their attitudes toward students living in poverty and their practices, what they said often suggested high levels of compassion coupled with low levels of training. One culturally adept teacher, Jackie, demonstrated this compassion when one of her low SES students was forced to move to one of the district's new schools.

I look at each kid as an individual because you have to. They are. Those low-income kids, I look at them. I have one of them and he's going to Endeavor next year and he's going to get lost in the shuffle and I think who's going to be there and it's breaking my heart (Jackie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Naming and claiming our differences is the first step in the transformation for equity. From this understanding, teachers can begin to esteem student diversity, leverage student strengths, adapt their teaching, and shift their focus to what changes they are capable of implementing instead of merely tolerating or mitigating the conflicts they experience when working with low SES students and their families.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**  
**CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE STRATEGIES**

As discussed in Chapter Two, providing a culturally responsive classroom is a difficult task for teachers. For many teachers, their expectations of who will be sitting in the desks at the beginning of the day will be different in reality from what they imagined at the beginning of their teacher education. Because most elementary teachers are White, female, and middle class, many of them will be working with students whose cultures differ from theirs in many ways. Thankfully, the principles and strategies of culturally responsive classrooms do not differ greatly from basic principles of effective teaching.

In the interviews, culturally adept teachers talked about five essential strategies for a culturally responsive classroom: (1) building relationships, (2) promoting individual empowerment, (3) developing personal meaning for students, (4) setting high expectations, and (5) creating the learning communities they depend upon. In a culturally responsive classroom, the elements of a culturally responsive classroom are meant to be used in combination with each other (Irvine & Armento, 2001). Figure 5 below shows the primary strategies used by culturally adept teachers.

<b>Culturally Responsive Strategies</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
Building Relationships	Jackie, Blaire, Esteban, David
Promoting Individual Empowerment	David, Jeanne, Blaire
Developing Personal Meaning for Students	Grace, David
Setting High Expectations	Jackie, Janice, David, Blaire
Creating Learning Communities	Janice, Jackie, David

Figure 5: Five Essential Culturally Responsive Strategies.

When talking about their primary responsibility in the classroom, most teachers saw their main responsibility as strengthening and building relationships. Teachers also

mentioned student safety as being very important. Student learning or academic achievement was third when they spoke about their primary job in the classroom. Most teachers in this study, who focused on making connections with their students, appeared sensitive to the socioeconomic factors that influenced the classroom climate and students' learning.

In the remaining segments of this chapter, I will discuss the culturally adept teachers' use of the dominant strategies needed to create culturally responsive classrooms. Each of them did not demonstrate use of all of the strategies nor was that a realistic expectation.

### **Building Relationships**

Overwhelmingly, culturally adept teachers thought strong teacher-student relationships were the key to a positive classroom environment. Teachers believed students and parents are to be treated with civility, gentleness, and with support. The teachers saw their classroom in terms of optimism and hope. Jackie talked about caring and relationships in two ways. The first focused on one of her important teaching philosophies. In the second excerpt, she talked about caring and building community.

Discipline and working with children gets back to one of my philosophies which is kids don't care how much you know until they know you care and relationships are going to go a long way. I can get kids to do a lot of things they wouldn't do for other people because I have a relationship and they know I care . . .

It's all about engaging and motivating these kids and finding what matters to them and building a sense of community with the kids with such shattered lives. I had

one girl who was in her 16<sup>th</sup> school by 4<sup>th</sup> grade. How can I get that child to see that this is a place where she is cared about, that this is a place where she has peers that are going to work together and trust that that is not going to fall apart too (Jackie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview)?

Jackie experienced situational poverty when she was younger. She remembers being on government assistance and going grocery shopping with food stamps. Her experiences helped her understand how students can feel when their basic needs are difficult to meet and how important having the support of the school community is to their success both socially and academically.

The teachers spoke of school as being a place where students can feel welcomed and at home. If students had a difficult environment at home, teachers were aware of this and attempted to transform their classroom into a place where students felt safe and cared for. Two teachers, Blaire and Esteban, talked about this level of outreach.

My job is to do everything I can for that child. To be the home if I have to be. The children need to know that this is a home away from home. They don't have to worry here about being loved. They don't have to worry about the electricity or the refrigerator. They can focus on the learning (Blaire, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

I just want to be caring to these kids. A lot of these kids come to school just don't have a lot of luxuries I had growing up. They don't have a lot of safety nets. So school is kind of a safe haven for them. I just like to be there for them. Being in a place where they feel safe and with someone they can just talk to if there was ever a problem (Esteban, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Seeing the classroom as a home away from home or a safe haven is a way for teachers to provide the type of learning environment that says, “You’re welcome here” regardless of your income or place in society.

Jackie talked about relationships in this way, “What works is human connections. Finding a way to bring them over to your side. Finding the quality things they’re doing, making a big deal out of the actions they take that are correct.” She knows from her experiences as a child that students living in poverty strongly depend on stable relationships and the connections that come from these relationships.

In David’s classroom, the first weeks of school are for laying the foundations for the year. He sets his goal in simple terms. The yearly goal was not defined in terms of academic outcomes but in such intangibles as happiness and how to enjoy life. It was not a surprise to hear him stress the importance of relationships and classroom environment.

Making sure they leave happier than they came in. That’s my ultimate goal. I try to teach kids to enjoy life be happy. Find something that you love to do. I think the classroom environment comes first. I think that relationships come first. If I can get students to love being here than the other stuff will almost take care of itself. It’s not to say I don’t teach kids but there is just more to teaching than opening a book. Kids need to smile and feel good that they’re here (David, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Culturally adept teachers’ classrooms are built upon optimism and hope. When textbooks talk about building a positive classroom environment, they are truly talking about the relationships that are constructed between teachers and students. These are classrooms where everyone is welcome and all students believe they make a positive

contribution to the class regardless if they are the sons or daughters of an upper-class family or living in poverty.

### **Developing Personal Meaning for Students**

Ladson-Billings (1997) and Nieto (2000) argue that culturally responsive educators establish learning outcomes that are worthwhile, meaningful, and useful to all students. This can be accomplished by knowing and understanding students so that personal and relevant examples can be used to illustrate content ideas. Linking the interests together is difficult to do on a daily basis. However, having the background knowledge of students' living in poverty helps teachers make the link when the opportunity presents itself. David intentionally linked his students' interests with curriculum.

I'll start with Joseph. He's extremely bright. Lives with a single mom. I can put any book in front of him and he can read it. He's an extremely gifted writer. Oftentimes, he can sit and write for hours. He's also angry though. He gets mad easily. Hard to stay on task if it's not something he wants to do. But if you make it something he thinks is worthwhile, he can accomplish anything. With Joseph, it's kind of cliché, but he's really into dinosaur, so I have him write stories about dinosaurs. I'm even able to teach him science using examples with dinosaurs. Sometimes it sounds silly but it works (David, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

David showed an intense interest in his students and their lives. He understood what sparked their interests and how to reach out using the interests to his advantage. In the example above, dinosaurs were a vehicle to writing and science content.

Jeanne talked about one of her first graders in a way that demonstrated she was intentionally trying to find the personal meaning for the student in the curriculum.

I do the things normal teachers do. I try to find what interests them and encourage them a lot. It's nothing magical. One of my students is a fantastic writer with a great voice. She has a real special gift. We do a type of writer's workshop where the students have the choice to write about whatever topic that interests them. She likes to write about the places where she has lived. She's only six years old but she's been in so many places. I know other schools where the student's write to prompts but how interesting is that? I want the students to be able to write about something that keeps them writing (Jeanne, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Jeanne understood how important it was for her students to have the freedom to choose topics that were relevant to their lives. Without this freedom, she feared the students would lose their voice in the writing.

Teachers who gave students the freedom to find personal meaning as well as understanding their special interests were more culturally responsive teachers. It's not complicated if teachers know their students. It was often as simple as Blaire using facts about basketball to teach her low-income boys math and how to read.

### **Promoting Individual Empowerment**

When talking with teachers I found them to be strong advocates for their students as well as enthusiastic cheerleaders for their students. Teachers found ways to be positive in situations where they knew students were struggling at home or did not have the full

attention of their parents. In the absence of role models, they filled the role or actively promoted individual empowerment and self-efficacy

Grace showed how important is it to give students choice and the opportunity to create classrooms where they invest themselves in the classroom. Teachers often find opportunities to positively redirect negative behaviors. This is how Grace empowered students in her classroom.

It's only my third year but I'm realizing my classroom environment isn't the more traditional one. It's loud but kids are working together using cooperative learning strategies. Lots of peer tutors. I'm just building success in the classroom and very proactive positive reinforcement. Because I know generally speaking but not all the time students who come in from poverty will have behavior issues and I have a lot of leadership roles and I find that really helps at the very beginning because there are kids that could go either way. Giving them choice in the leadership positions, they feel successful and have a reason to come to school. It's not so negative (Grace, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Grace does seem to generalize descriptions to students living in poverty. However, I heard her saying that, "I know my kids and this is a way to positively work with them." She gives them opportunities to create a positive classroom.

The culturally adept teacher David spoke about how important it was for students to look ahead in their life and find something that they love. He taught a unit that was not based upon any state mandated grade level expectations. The unit was on hopes, dreams, and heroes.



I talk a lot about how to be happy. What they have to do in life to fulfill their dreams. I do a unit on hopes and dreams. Finding what they love. Finding what they want to do. I also focus on heroes. I tell them it's okay to find someone they want to be like. Someone they want to emulate and it doesn't have to be a dad or mom it can be a teacher. It can be a president. Someone who is a positive role model who they can be like. Find out what they did to be successful, follow in their footsteps and do what they do (David, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

David understood that instruction isn't limited to concepts such as fractions and writing effective paragraphs. It is equally important if not more important to get students thinking about role models and thinking about their futures. Students in poverty may not be asked about their hopes and dreams as frequently as students from middle-class backgrounds. Culturally responsive teachers see building self-efficacy as one of their primary responsibilities.

### **Setting High Expectations**

Teachers in a culturally responsive classroom believe that their students are capable of learning and developing to the maximum level of their potential (Darling-Hammond, 2000). All the teachers said they have high expectations but what does that really mean? The culturally adept teachers, Jackie and Janice, talk about high expectations in their classrooms.

I try my best to teach to each kid's ability and know what their abilities are and not let income or what happens in their life be an excuse not to do what they can

do. But it's that balance of making them feel successful and challenging them at the same time. I struggle with that. It's very hard (Jackie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

I just say to them, "I have different expectations for different kids and that's perfectly okay. Because where you're at, I'm going to push you" (Janice, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

David had a more in-depth way of thinking about high expectations. He hinted at how the term "high expectations" may be an overused phrase in education.

Every student has their own ability level. You know, high expectations. What does it really mean? You know, Joseph is, well you have one student who is working at seventh grade level who can sit down and write a five paragraph essay and you have another kid who is reading at first grade level. I mean how . . . I mean high expectations . . . it's just a phrase to me. I want all my kids to well. I want all my kids to do the best they can do. I don't expect them all to be on grade level. I don't expect them all to pass the WASL. I just expect them to try their best. Enjoy what they're doing and learn (David, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

David understood that for some teachers, high expectations might be just a catchphrase. Again, this perspective may have come from his experience listening to his father, the principal, speak about teachers at the dinner table or in conversations with his step-mom, who was a teacher. He understood, however, that high expectations meant looking at each individual student and seeing the potential for individual learning and growth.

Culturally adept teachers talked about high expectations in ways that showed they individualize their expectations instead of generalize their expectations. By individualizing the expectations they were able to balance high levels of expectations with the high levels of understanding. Teachers are under federal, state, and district pressures to have all their students succeed. They are constantly told that every student is required to reach the standard and that it is their job to get them to grade level. But is this a realistic goal for each student in each grade? This goal doesn't take into account each students' strengths and challenges. Teachers are doing right by low SES students when they see the student for who they are as individuals and not as an entire group of Charlie Browns.

The culturally adept teacher understands that having high expectations for students means believing that all students are capable of learning and growing. Blaire eloquently spoke to this concept, "You need to have high expectations to believe in kids but you have to adjust them to get everyone there. You shouldn't lower expectations. You should find ways to enrich them."

### **Creating Learning Communities**

Culturally adept teachers realize that it takes more than just great teaching to help their low SES students succeed academically and socially in their classrooms. When teachers team with school administration, counselors, families, and community resources, they create learning support communities. Everyone in the learning support community works together for the child.

Educators can help families by providing them with information about community resources such as homework hotlines and mentoring services such as Big Brothers Big Sisters. Teachers and caregivers can recognize that it is their common goal to support the education of the student and only by working together can they strengthen and improve the growth of the child (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

In the interviews, Janice, Jackie, and David talked about their secretaries, counselors, psychologists, principals, families, and team of teachers as an integral part of the learning community that support students living in poverty. All of these people, working as a team, helped their low-income students in their own way.

There's a school psychologist and school counselor that can help with food and support families that are going through difficulties. We have a wonderful secretary who gives crackers to kids whose tummies are hungry who didn't have breakfast and it's 11 in the morning and they're just not performing and it's not just that they can't do it, they're hungry. There are so many resources available. Even just talking with my teammates and being open about it (Janice, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

I think a lot of times it becomes us against them instead of us all together, working for the child. I think a lot of parents feel threatened by teachers. Judged you know. I think Burnett does a really good job with this. I think Burnett's doing a good job of making the parents feel like we are on their side. Even if they don't have a two parent family and have all the supports at home that they need. We do a good job of letting them know we are not judging them, we're on their side, not

pointing fingers at them. We're here just to do whatever we can do to support your child. I was on the BIT team and it's a difficult thing to come in and sit at a table with eight other people but Florence (counselor), Florence is just awesome. She does a good job of just letting the parent know we're not here to put down your child; we're here to help your child get all the services they deserve to be successful. I think that connection with the parents is important (David, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

One of my great resources is Beverly (Principal). The other is Florence, our school counselor. She has a lot of insight of what's going on and what you need to know about these kids and looking at ways to get help the families that need help. My principal Beverly, she understands and I feel supported by her. I think as a teacher teaching, to know that the principal supports you and to know that I can say, "I don't know what to do with this kid anymore. I need help." I know I can say that and I know it's not going to be a bad reflection on me as a teacher. It means I need help and I don't know what to do with this child. But Beverly says, "We don't give up you and I." Beverly will take the time to work with kids individually and she understands. It means I don't have to solve every problem (Jackie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

Teachers know that the burden does not rest on them and them alone to help students who live in poverty. The challenges that exist are too enormous to tackle alone. It was obvious that the support of the principal and counselor is essential. However, it is also crucial not to overlook the support personnel in a school building such as the

secretaries or custodians. They often have connections with students that are critical and crucial to a student's success. Lastly, there is a concern that parents do not always feel part of the team or capable of working with schools. Coupling the knowledge that parents may not have had a great school experience themselves, with intentional efforts to make them feel valued and appreciated, will inevitably make the learning community stronger.

### **Summary**

The culturally adept teachers I interviewed enjoyed their work and had a heightened sense of the needs of students living in poverty. Implementing the ten basic strategies of culturally responsive teaching was not an intentional focus of any teacher from the three schools I visited. However, from their talk, I gained a sense that teachers found value in developing relationships, connecting the classroom to personal meaning for students, promoting individual empowerment, maintaining individual expectations to a high level, and using the people around them as resources in a learning community. These foundations for effective teaching and learning for all students are the basis of equity and excellence in the classroom (Irvine & Armento, 2000).

Elementary teachers have a reputation for demonstrating exceptional levels of care and concern for their student's academic and social-emotional well-being. The seven culturally adept teachers lived up to the reputation. They used their care and concern as the basis for developing relationships with their students and the student's families. Time and time they talked about making connections and how state mandated grade level expectations came second to building positive relationships and creating a positive classroom environment.

When culturally adept teachers focus on the curriculum, they consider how relevant the curriculum is to their students. They understand that this strategy is not just for diverse classrooms. They know that this is a basic example of good teaching. Janice, when she was an administrator, had a teacher who taught students how to use knives and forks in her classroom, and that this was relevant, useful, and important to each child. A simple ingredient for good teaching is finding something that is important to the child as well as transforming the teaching into a skill or learning the student can use.

The culturally adept teachers talked about ways they encouraged the students to succeed. In essence, they were huge cheerleaders for the kids. They demonstrated a “never give up” attitude and often used personal examples of how school can be the student’s best opportunity to be successful. Culturally adept teachers are role models for their students. They encourage students to think about the future and how what they do now can impact what lies ahead. In addition to themselves as role models, they give students examples of successful people and the traits they exhibit so that students have a starting point for their own hopes and dreams.

Much has been said about high expectations in education and creating high standards to which all students are held accountable. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2000 emphasizes that one hundred percent of all students are required to reach standard or grade level by 2014. Culturally adept teachers understand this is not an effective way to think about high expectations. They understand each child has the capability to achieve and each student is developmentally and culturally different. Due to these differences, students need differentiated instruction as well as differentiated expectations. High

expectations means taking students where they are instructionally and culturally and pushing them forward so at the end of the year they have maximized their learning.

Strong teachers know that working together as a team is more effective than working in isolation. Teamwork in a school begins with teachers but it certainly does not end with teachers. Culturally adept teachers create and nurture existing learning communities that include everyone from parents, to principals, to secretaries at the front desk. In schools where students are living in poverty, there are many challenges to overcome. Resources become critical to helping each individual student. A few teachers talked about academic programs and certain curricula that are effective in the classroom. However, most teachers spoke of the people around them and the support they received when working with students in poverty. No resource is as critical as the people that are considered part of the team or learning community.

In order for each child to flourish and learn how to learn, it is necessary that classrooms are grounded in culturally responsive strategies. It is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure the maximum development of each child. Elementary teachers, who work in schools where there are a high percentage of low SES non-minority students, face many challenges. Getting students to grade level is not an easy task nor is it the teacher's only goal. When teachers focus on building relationships and developing strong learning communities, culturally responsive classrooms where young people feel, and are, capable and empowered are established (Irvine & Armento, 2000).



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Training teachers to be culturally proficient holds promise for lessening some of the enduring shortcomings in providing equity for White low SES elementary students living in low-income neighborhoods. Challenges for low SES students that are well documented in the literature include: (a) poor student outcomes, (b) low graduation rates, (c) low teacher expectations, and (d) lack of cultural synchronization. When the data from this study were examined it became clear that analyzing teacher attitudes and understanding in terms of cultural proficiency, and whether teachers engaged in culturally responsive pedagogy, was not going to be a simple process. Do teachers place the challenges and responsibilities to achieve on the low-income students and their families or do they focus on the changes they are capable of implementing and adapt their own practices? The question of tolerance for diversity or transformation for equity was difficult to process.

By conducting interviews with twelve elementary school teachers from three different schools, and analyzing what they said about their work with low SES students, we can increase our understanding into how educational inequities are present in the classroom. With the intent to improve the educational outcomes of White students living in poverty, it is vital for teachers to be mindful of how issues of poverty complicate their work. First, elementary teachers must be able to assess their level of cultural proficiency. Naming and claiming their differences is one critical step toward this aim. They must, second, think about and evaluate their practices to determine if they are culturally

responsive. Third, they must increase their skill level of cultural proficiency. Cultural proficiency is not dependant on teachers' personal experiences. However, cultural proficiency can be augmented when macro-culture teachers have experiences with students, families, and community members that are from diverse backgrounds. And finally, teachers must analyze student outcome data to determine which students are successful as the result of the adaptations they make to maximize the learning of low SES students. Understanding these caveats, teachers can become culturally adept and move away from views centered on tolerance and more toward a process where equity can be provided for their low SES non-minority students.

### **Conclusions Related to Personal Experiences**

As evidenced in chapter five, elementary teachers use their personal experiences as building blocks for their own classrooms. Teachers reflect upon how they were raised in terms of the values transmitted to them and apply them in their classrooms. Teachers are also aware of the negative impact of their experiences growing up and use these experiences as examples not to be repeated in their classrooms. One example of how classrooms were negatively impacted by teachers' experiences was the "bootstrap example". A few teachers project the "bootstrap" mentality or the belief that if a person works hard enough in America they can accomplish anything. If a teacher's thinking is grounded in the "American Dream," they inevitably are disconnected from the reality of their low SES students. Families living in poverty are most often working two or three jobs yet the "American Dream" remains un-lived. If teachers believe that "hard work" is

the key ingredient to academic success, they are missing more important ways to support their students living in poverty and provide a more culturally responsive classroom.

I also discovered that whether the teacher's personal history was similar or dissimilar to their student's histories, teachers believe their life experience is an asset in their work. Their life experiences ranged from living in poverty to growing up in an affluent neighborhood. Some teachers were raised amongst a family of educators while some were raised in homes that would be considered working class. Remarkably, each teacher regarded their life experiences as a positive influence in their teaching.

School districts should seek to assemble a teaching force that has teachers with a mixture of experiences and dispositions. Teacher preparation programs should also seek to enlarge the group of pre-service teachers to include additional teachers who are more heterogeneous in composition.

### **Conclusions Related to Cultural Proficiency**

Cultural proficiency is multifaceted and gets expressed in different ways by different teachers, depending on situations and circumstances at hand. Some teachers are unaware of the biases they carry into the classroom. Teachers from this study possessed different skill levels of cultural proficiency. These skill levels determined whether teachers were culturally unskilled or culturally adept teachers.

Teachers whose behaviors and attitudes were more indicative of culturally destructiveness, cultural incapacity, or cultural color blindness were termed culturally unskilled. These struggling teachers operated their classrooms more from a viewpoint of tolerance rather than a viewpoint of equity. What this means is that teachers saw their

classroom demographics as a challenge or on the whole neglected them. Mere tolerance for diversity is evidenced when teachers place the focus of academic and social success on the low SES students and their families rather than focusing on what changes or adaptations they could make so that their students could be more successful. Five teachers from this study were culturally unskilled and demonstrated behaviors and attitudes that would indicate a tolerance for diversity.

Teachers' practices that were more indicative of cultural proficiency or those who possess more skills are termed culturally adept. These teachers' practices and attitudes differed from the unskilled teachers in that they focused on what changes or adaptations they could make in their classroom or what changes the school could make in their policies so that low SES students could succeed. They move the focus away from the students and onto them. They also differentiate their instruction to the needs of low-income students. Most importantly, they recognize difference as diversity rather than as inappropriate responses to the environment. Overall, seven out of the twelve teachers interviewed were culturally adept and created classrooms based upon equity for all of their students.

When discussing culturally unskilled teachers it is important to note that most teachers from this study demonstrate high levels of care and compassion. However, despite these high levels of care and compassion, they also exhibit attitudes that are culturally destructive or based on cultural incapacity. These behaviors indicate a lower skill level in cultural proficiency that may point to a lack of training or experiences to awaken higher skills.

Two culturally unskilled teachers talk about their low-income students in terms of stereotypes that characterize low-income students as lazy, not valuing education, and having parents who don't care. They view their students from a deficit perspective rather than a strengths-based perspective. Teachers judge the parenting skills of working-class and poor families. They feel it is their responsibility to teach them the values that are lacking in their student's home. This finding is supported in the literature (Sleeter, 1996).

Cultural color blindness is present in classrooms where, in spite of the percentage of low-income students in their classroom, teachers are unable to concretely identify their students living in poverty or what special needs exist that must be addressed by the teacher. These teachers see each student as equal and don't treat any student differently.

Most teachers, both culturally unskilled and culturally adept, have little or no training for working with students living in poverty. They aren't able to speak about current knowledge of best teaching practices specifically for low-income students. Teachers who are "highly qualified", that is, fully certificated to teach in elementary schools, can lack cultural proficiency and be ill-equipped to work with diverse populations.

An intentional focus on low SES students, including specific strategies and action plans, does not exist in School Improvement Plans (SIP). This neglect also indicates culturally blindness. Discrepancies on the Washington Assessment for Student Learning between low-income students and the middle class students are reported in the SIP without any solutions to address the discrepancies. Few teachers in this study mention statewide assessment or other school based data when talking about their low-income students. It is not likely that teachers will seriously critique system practices that are

impacted by class if they do not see how this directly affects students' school outcomes. It is also not likely that schools based on equity will exist if School Improvement Plans continue to neglect their low SES White populations.

Programs that address high needs students exist exclusively for English Language Learners (ELL) and Special Education but not for low-income students. Students who fall into one of these categories receive extra support. Students who are low SES can be neglected and receive no direct support. Resources, including money for school budgets and assistant principals, are evenly distributed in school districts. Most of these resources are distributed according to the number of students in school. The needs of schools, such as the number of low SES students, are rarely taken into consideration, therefore creating schools that have large numbers of high needs students and a dearth of resources to address these needs.

Culturally adept teachers recognize that students who live in poverty not only have basic needs that aren't being met, they also experience the embarrassment and shame that poverty brings. These teachers are also aware that low-income families often have had bad experiences with schools and are therefore ill-equipped to navigate public school systems. In order to mitigate these experiences, culturally adept teachers reach out to students beyond the classroom, such as providing extra financial assistance or helping low SES students access health services.

There is a difference between teachers who had administrative experiences, either as an administrator or having an administrator as one of their parents, and teachers with dissimilar experiences. The two teachers with the aforementioned experiences demonstrate a systems level or "balcony" approach to education rather than an individual

or “dance floor” approach. They demonstrate a perspective and a distinct level of awareness that identify them as more culturally adept than other teachers in the study. Teachers, as a group, are generally not big picture people.

The seven culturally adept teachers differentiate their expectations and their teaching practices. These teachers adapt their behaviors in the classroom to meet the needs of students rather than placing the onus of change upon the students and their families. Some teachers go to great lengths to reach out to students, including the large investments of their own time and significant amounts of their own dollars. When teachers are differentiating their instruction, adapting their practices, and reaching out to low SES students, they are providing classrooms that are transforming for equity rather than tolerating diversity.

### **Conclusions Related to Culturally Responsive Strategies**

Culturally adept teachers use many strategies found in culturally responsive classrooms. They view establishing relationships and making school a place where students want to be and can have fun as their primary responsibility. They emphasize that a student won't care about education unless they know the teacher cares about them. Elementary teachers who are successful have high expectations and understand that expectations are meant to be differentiated according to a student's needs. They communicate these expectations to their students.

Culturally adept teachers are also cheerleaders for their students. They are advocates for their student's academic successes and social behavioral growth. They demonstrate high levels of caring and nurturing for their students. Above all, culturally

adept teachers know how to find what interests a student and create learning opportunities that incorporate their interests.

In the culturally responsive classroom, strong teacher leadership teams exist that are the foundations for strong learning communities. Culturally adept teachers rely on each other, their principals, and their counselors. Working together towards the common goal, providing equity for their low SES students, proves to be an effective model.

### **Teacher Advice**

Throughout the interviews, teachers talked about advice they would give teachers who are going to work in schools that serve working class or low-income neighborhoods. The following advice stems from first-hand experience working in classrooms with large numbers of low SES students and focuses on the qualities of a culturally proficient teacher and culturally responsive pedagogy. What follows is a list of what culturally unskilled teachers reported as well as what the culturally adept teachers reported to be useful. The desire for their peers to be successful did not depend on whether they were culturally unskilled or culturally adept. Teachers who are grouped expressed similar advice for their peers.

1. Establish, strengthen, and improve student, teacher, and family relationships. Relationships come first (All teachers).
2. Involve parents more in decision making processes at schools (David, Richard).
3. Choose your battles. Is returning homework more important than the child enjoying coming to school? Prioritize what your importance is in his/her life (Brynn, Melissa).



4. Believe all students, regardless of economic background, have the same brain capacity and the same desire, willingness, and ability to learn (Melissa, Esteban, Jill, Jeanne).
5. Help kids own the classroom. Give them choices. Get them to buy into the classroom (Grace).
6. Communicate when good things and bad things happen (Esteban, Jackie, David).
7. Work with fellow teachers. Teachers have to be on the same team (Janice, Melissa, Grace, David, Richard, Blaire).
8. Do not blame families for lack of support (Brynn).
9. Teach kids to read, write, and compute. Don't pity them (Janice).
10. Take care of the child's needs, but in moderation. Low SES children need lots of attention, food, sleep, and friendship-making/keeping skills at school. Take the time to allow kids to talk with you, eat, take a nap, etc. It is time well spent. However, put in place structures so that these "needs" do not become an excuse for not getting work done (Brynn, Esteban).

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations of this study. The first limitation is situated around interview data. The disadvantage of using data from interviews is that there is room for diverse interpretations of the problems at hand. My understanding of the data and how I make decisions impact the entire process of data collection, coding, and analysis. The data that were obtained is to some extent determined by my questions. The original interview questions are meant to answer specific research questions. Then again, due to

the qualitative nature of the study, as I interviewed more teachers, I added or adapted certain questions in order to obtain better data. In spite of this, by using open-ended questions, this influence was reduced. Also, oral language is much more varied than written language, so the switch from oral text to written text could have changed its meaning (Wolcott, 2001). Ultimately, the teachers' unedited voices are not heard. Furthermore, the interviews weren't factual accounts. They were the representations of the teachers' time in the classroom with students. Their accounts can differ from their actual pedagogical practices. Future research studies would be required to verify whether teachers' practices matched their perceptions and descriptions of their work. Only direct and extended observation of teachers' work in the classroom would address this limitation.

The second limitation of this study has to do with reliability. No other person was involved in the data analysis, so co-rater reliability was not established. Interview data were examined by the researcher to determine whether the teachers' descriptions of their practices were culturally proficient and had characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogy. I tried to determine whether they were culturally adept or did they treat students based on stereotypes and fail to acknowledge the cultural differences between them and their students. As a result of time restrictions, an additional student or colleague was not available for this study to help establish co-rater reliability.

The third limitation is the teacher selection procedure. There was only one elementary teacher from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. The remaining 11 were not. Because the number of teachers who participated in the study was low due to time and resource limitations, the number of teachers in all racial/ethnic groups was insufficient to

draw conclusions. Further studies need to be carried out to conclude whether the results from this research can be generalized to other diverse groups of elementary school teachers.

## **Recommendations**

The student population is growing more diverse yet the diversity in the teaching population is not. Improved efforts to employ and hold on to teachers from varied cultural backgrounds are needed. However, if the teaching force will remain predominantly White middle-class, and female, we must also concentrate on increasing teachers' cultural proficiency and ability to engage in culturally responsive pedagogy. The ultimate goal is to provide classrooms transforming for equity and improve the academic outcomes of diverse students in our elementary school classrooms

The first set of recommendations that follow applies to elementary teacher preparation programs and educational leadership programs in general. A second set of recommendations follows that are unique to educational leaders both at the school and district level.

First, teacher and educational leadership programs must re-examine program standards related to the cultural proficiency of pre-service teachers and principals and create plans that require students to demonstrate developing competence in these areas. Pre-service teachers and pre-service administrators must have or develop the ability to assess their level of cultural proficiency and their understanding and use of culturally responsive pedagogy. This assessment must be combined with evaluation by faculty who are themselves, developing culturally proficiency. Self-assessment and self-reporting of

cultural proficiency alone may not be accurate, especially for macro-culture educators who have lived culturally isolated lives. Based on this information or looking inwards, pre-service educators should develop a plan for personal and professional growth derived from this multifaceted evaluation.

Second, pre-service educators must have experiences with diverse populations during their preparation programs. This is especially important when White, middle-class monolingual educators have little life experience with people from diverse cultures. When these first-hand experiences are in diverse schools and communities, pre-service educators can begin to see the differences from a strengths perspective instead of a deficit perspective.

Third, pre-service programs for educators must expand the definition of “diverse student populations” to include the culture of poverty. When tackling issues of diversity, programs often restrict their discussions to topics of race, ethnicity, sex, and gender. A more comprehensive look at diversity must be developed in order to sufficiently address the concerns of local schools and the struggles of low SES students that may go unnoticed.

The second set of recommendations is intended for practicing principals and school district administrators.

First, it is critical that a school leader have a tool to assess their school’s ability to serve low-income populations and that the district supports the school’s efforts to analyze the needs of low SES students. Constraints should be removed in identifying low SES students.

Second, School Improvement Plans are supposed to not only identify the strengths and weaknesses of low SES students but should also have a plan of action to decrease the achievement gaps that exist. School demographics should inform the practices of administrators. The plan should be a working plan that is continually within arms reach of any school leader who is focused on student learning. District leaders and schools should refer to these plans often throughout the year to determine if current practices reflect their work towards common goals.

Third, school leaders must implement mentor programs in their schools. Mentor programs connect students living in poverty with role models who give them hope. Mentor programs should include student-to-student mentors, teacher-to-student mentors, and community volunteer-to-student mentors.

Fourth, school leaders must create strong leadership teams and support these teams with resources from within the school as well as community resources. Learning communities can be built around the common theme that all students have the ability to grow and be successful in school. The focus should be on student assets rather than deficits. Teachers should not work in isolation to accomplish the task of helping every student succeed. School policies and procedures must be developed or adapted to reflect equity.

Lastly, districts should do a risk analysis of their schools and allocate resources accordingly to address the needs of low SES populations. It is not enough to isolate student population as the only variable to determine support personnel such as assistant principals, counselors, and number of teachers. Using factors that include rate of students

living in poverty to determine what supports are needed in each school would help create school districts that are transforming towards equity.

### **Future Research**

The findings of this research have, at times, mirrored what is in the existing literature relative to a teachers' level of cultural proficiency and their regard for diversity in the classroom. For example, teachers often rely on stereotypes when identifying their students living in poverty. The study also brought to light new findings, for example, all teachers saw their personal experiences as assets in their work with students. This study also raises more questions that need to be addressed.

Additional studies are needed to examine the tension that exists when teachers exhibit characteristics and attitudes that would be described as culturally unskilled and at the same time they demonstrate compassion for their students. Next, we must look at whether teachers who grew up in generational poverty differ in their use of culturally responsive pedagogy as compared to their mostly middle-class counterparts. Furthermore, we must investigate if outcomes of low SES students are better when they work with teachers who are culturally adept, as opposed to working with teachers who are culturally unskilled.

From an administrative viewpoint, studies should be conducted to determine how culturally proficient principals impact their schools. Moreover, are teachers who work in schools with large populations of minorities more likely to demonstrate higher levels of cultural proficiency than their counterparts who work in predominantly White neighborhood schools? We must also determine what happens in schools where there are

small pockets of students living in poverty. If some schools that have almost half of their students living in poverty are not addressing this at risk population of kids in their School Improvement Plans, what are other schools doing with smaller low SES populations?

### **Summary**

The population of students served in elementary classrooms in the Pacific Northwest is becoming more diverse. For the time being, the teaching force is projected to remain predominantly White, middle-class, monolingual, and female. When there is a lack of fit between the primary cultures of the students and their teachers, the students are at a disadvantage. Students who live in poverty are at greater risk for school problems than their White middle class peers. Their school and post-secondary outcomes are poorer as well.

If we are to improve the educational results of low SES students we must examine teacher attitudes and practices. Hence, I began this study. Much can be learned from interviews with elementary teachers who work in schools that serve low-income neighborhoods. For this research, 12 teachers from three schools were interviewed at length about their life from childhood to adulthood. They then talked about their work as classroom teachers and identified connections between their personal histories and their work. This study showed that their personal histories have some bearing on their work.

The data from this study were analyzed by sorting teacher's interview data into the broad themes of cultural proficiency and culturally responsive strategies. Then, data was further examined to determine whether the teacher's practices were culturally unskilled, suggesting cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, or cultural blindness practices or if their practices were culturally adept, indicating high skill levels of cultural

proficiency. After determining the cultural proficiency skill level of each teacher, their talk was examined to determine whether teachers were creating classrooms based on a tolerance for diversity or a transformation for equity.

In this study, five teachers were termed culturally unskilled and taught in classrooms that, on some level, neglected the low SES non-minority population of students. On the contrary, seven teachers demonstrated high levels of cultural proficiency and were termed culturally adept. In these classrooms, classrooms that focused on a transformation for equity, teachers held low SES White students in esteem. They also used demographics to inform their practices as well as leverage the assets and strengths that low SES non-minority students brought to school.

Findings of this study can be used to enlighten future research studies described in this chapter. What is learned from this and future studies can then be used to guide improvements in elementary teacher preparation programs and educational leadership programs as well as improve current practices in classrooms and school districts. The critical target is to increase the success rate of students who are among the most marginalized by both schools and society; those students who are White and who live in poverty.



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## APPENDIX A

### LIFE HISTORY QUESTIONS

0.0 To start with, where were you born?

0.1 What was the apartment or house like that you grew up in?

0.2 What was your bedroom like?

0.3 Can you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

1.0 Tell me about your parents.

1.0 What memories do you have of them?

2.0 How did your family earn money?

2.1 How did your family compare to others in the neighborhood – richer, poorer, the same?

2.3 What kinds of things did your family spend money on?

3.0 What were you like as a child?

3.1 What did you like to eat?

3.2 What did you do for fun?

3.3 What were your favorite toys or games?

4.0 What kind of school did you go to?

4.1 Were you a good student?

4.2 What was your favorite subject?

4.3 Who was your favorite teacher and why?

5.0 What's different about growing up today from when you were growing up?

6.0 What dreams and goals did you have for your life when you graduated?

6.1 How did you decide what you wanted to do with your life?

- 6.2 How do you feel about that choice?
- 7.0 Tell me about your family now.
- 7.1 What the best thing about being a parent? A grandparent?
- 8.0 How are you like your parents? Unlike them?
- 8.1 What was most important to your parents?
- 9.0 What do you think are your three best qualities? Your three worst?
- 9.1 Which do you think you have the most of: talent, intelligence, education, or persistence?
- 9.2 How has it helped you in your life?
- 10.0 What have been the most influential experiences in your life?
- 10.1 What's the most difficult thing that ever happened to you?
- 10.2 How did you deal with it?
- 10.3 Do you think a person needs to first overcome serious setbacks or challenges to be truly successful?
- 11.0 What do you think the turning points have been in your life?
- 11.1 What were you like then?
- 12.0 Do you feel differently about yourself now from how you felt when you were younger?
- 12.1 How?
- 12.2 What do you think has stayed the same about you throughout life? What do you think has changed?
- 13.0 What things are most important to you now?
- 13.1 Why?

14.0 Who do you trust and depend on?

15.0 How have your dreams and goals changed through your life?

16.0 What do you know now that you wish you'd known when you were young?

17.0 How do you define a "good life" or a "successful life"?

18.0 What do you see as your place or purpose in life?

18.1 How did you come to that conclusion?

19.0 What would you like your children, grandchildren, or friends to remember about you?

## APPENDIX B

### WORK IN CLASSROOM QUESTIONS

- 0.0 To start, I'd like you to tell me a bit about your background, primarily your teaching experience, your present position and responsibilities and, perhaps, a bit about your training—whatever you're comfortable telling me.
- 1.0 When we talk about low-income kids, what do you think about?
- 2.0 Tell me about a kid who is low-income in your class.
- 2.1 What goes on with him/her in your class?
  - 2.2 What's worked with him/her?
  - 2.3 What hasn't?
  - 2.4 Tell me about the relationship you have with the kid's family.
- 3.0 Tell me about a kid who is low-income in your class who is doing well?
- 3.1 What goes on with him/her in your class?
  - 3.2 What's worked with him/her?
  - 3.3 Tell me about the relationship you have with the kid's family.
- 4.0 What are some of the biggest challenges that teachers face when understanding and addressing the needs of kids from low-income families?
- 5.0 How do you meet their challenges?
- 5.1 Tell me about the resources that are available to you.
  - 5.2 Tell me about any training you've had to work with kids from low-income families.
- 6.0 What more would you like the school to do?
- 7.0 What more would you like the family to do?

8.0 Tell me about a low-income kid who has really reached you in some way.

8.1 What do you think that kid's future is going to look like?

9.0 Some teachers talk about balancing "having high expectations" with "high levels of understanding" for these kids. How do you interpret that statement?

10.0 A lot of time when people have schools like yours (i.e. high rate of Low SES kids), they talk about how difficult it is... how do you interpret that statement?

10.1 Why do schools report their percentage of kids who are low SES when they are reporting their WASL scores?

11.0 Knowing what you know about how you grew up, how do you think that has influenced you in your teaching?

## APPENDIX C

### WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY CONSENT FORM

#### Elementary Teachers and Students of Poverty

Principal Investigator: Paul Goldman, Professor, Educational Leadership, WSU,  
Vancouver Washington, 360-546-9114; E-mail:  
pgoldman@wsu.edu

Slade R. McSheehy, Doctoral Student, Washington State  
University, Vancouver, Washington, 503-702-5755, E-mail:  
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#### Researchers' statement

We are asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called 'informed consent.' We will give you a copy of this form for your records.

#### PURPOSE AND BENEFITS

Due to the homogeneity of the teaching force and the increasing diversity of the student population, the purpose of this study is to gain insight into how teachers think about and teach students who are from low-income families. Hopefully what is learned through your participation will enable teacher and administrator preparation institutions to better prepare educators to work with richly diverse students in schools that are in low-income neighborhoods.

#### PROCEDURES

With your consent, two interview sessions of one or one and a half hours will be scheduled over a two week period. You will determine the location of each interview, but it should be a quiet space without interruption. Both interviews will be somewhat structured. The first interview is a life history that will include questions such as, "Where you were born?" and "What were you like as a child? This interview will lead up to and end at the time you became an elementary teacher. The second interview will involve what you do as an elementary teacher as well as reflecting about the connections between your life experiences and how you teach. I will digitally audio-tape each interview as well as take continuous notes during the interview. Interview data will be transcribed verbatim. You will have the opportunity to read and edit the interview transcripts so they convey your intended meaning.

The transcripts of the interviews will be analyzed and interpreted and the results will be part of my dissertation. They may also be shared at professional conferences or in professional writing. You may read and comment on their analysis but won't be able to

edit the work. Documents such as curriculum, lesson plans, school improvement plans, or any other documents that you think are germane to the study will also be collected.

#### RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

It is possible that during the focused life history, you may feel uncomfortable if you are asked a sensitive question about your life. During the first or second interview, you may also feel discomfort if you cannot answer a particular question. During any part of either interview, I will not dwell on any sensitive moment that may lead to further discomfort. In addition, you will not be obligated to answer any question and can stop the interview at any time. Furthermore, there may be risks to the children that are being discussed in the second series of interviews, if the participants use identifiers or identifiable behaviors. You will be asked to speak about students without using information that would identify the children to minimize this risk. Any names or information about these secondary subjects will be either redacted or changed in hopes that no deferential treatment befalls the children.

#### OTHER INFORMATION

You will determine what you disclose in the interviews and are not required to share anything you feel is too private. All information disclosed during the interview will be kept confidential. You will also determine if you want your first name used in the study and any subsequent publications and presentations. You may decide to use pseudonyms for yourself, your school, your principal, other teachers, etc. If you choose to use pseudonyms, they will appear in the transcriptions of the tapes and in any materials and presentations that are produced. If you choose to have your name changed in the study, the risk of being personally identified is low. There may be a slight risk of being identified if you allow the researcher to use your real name.

The digital recordings will be kept in a locked file cabinet and on my secure personal computer during the period they are being transcribed, and after the transcription is complete, in a secure file cabinet in my home for at least two years. After that, they may be destroyed. You may request one copy of your interview tapes and they will be provided.

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Printed name of researcher

Signature of researcher

Date

Subject's statement:

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have general questions about the research, I can ask the researcher listed above. If I have questions regarding my rights as a participant, I can call the WSU Institutional Review Board at (509)335-3668. This project has been reviewed and approved for human participation by the WSU IRB. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

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Printed name of subject

Signature of subject

Date