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# THE NEED TO CREATE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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**THE NEED TO CREATE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHERS:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

**by  
Cass Griffin**

**A THESIS**

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The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
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THE NEED TO CREATE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHERS:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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University of Nebraska, 2011

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Using nine reflections as a centerpiece, this thesis aims to inform readers about the power that an international travel experience and/or practica in dual-language environments can have in becoming a more effective teacher, a culturally responsive teacher. From personal experience in both settings, I think I am now better able to relate to students with culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds because I have been in a similar situation. Students with diverse backgrounds (that are different from their teacher) may have extra difficulty communicating or expressing their thoughts and ideas. Teachers need to recognize these difficulties and respond appropriately and in a constructivist manner to encourage and promote student learning. If students' needs are rejected, teachers could generate student resistance towards learning and lose the valuable opportunity to hear diverse perspectives on a variety of issues.

Throughout this paper, I will compare and share reflections I gathered from observations of mainstream and sheltered learning environments for ELLs (English language learners). These shared reflections will serve as an example of what it means to be a culturally responsive teacher (CRT) and why it is important to be a CRT in *any* teaching environment. I will also explore how teacher education programs could ensure pre-service teachers are exposed to the pedagogies and practices needed to become CRTs.

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**Background**

Defining 'diverse' students as those different from the largely white, non-Hispanic population that still dominates public school teaching and teacher education program (Banks, et al. 2005), there is no doubt that the population of students coming from a diverse background, including ELLs (English Language learners), different races, social classes, religions and sexual orientations is increasing in classrooms around the U.S (Lucas, Villegas, & Gonzalez, 2008; Regan, 1997; Reeves & Hamann 2008,; Taylor, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Villegas & Lucas, (2002, p. 20) reported that, "currently one of every three students in elementary and secondary schools is of a racial or ethnic minority background." In a classroom of 21, this means seven students will be of different racial or ethnic background. Furthermore, the population of students with limited proficiency in English increased by 105% between 1990 and 2000 (Lucas, Villegas & Gonzalez, 2008, p. 361) and has continued growing since then (Banks, et al. 2005). Considering these facts and hearing the disturbing revelation found in the study conducted by Lucas, Villegas and Gonzalez (2008, p. 361) "the majority of teachers report that they do not feel prepared to teach ELLs" we must get serious and start looking at what teacher education programs must do to best prepare pre-service teachers and how to provide opportunities for in-service teachers to attain the knowledge.

With the increasing demands in testing and accountability, where English is the medium of assessment, many ELLs and other culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students are not able to truly demonstrate what they know (Abedi, 2005). If students were to receive improved access to the content via culturally responsive instruction (CRT) we

could see an increase in students' test scores and overall classroom performance (Lucas, Villegas & Gonzalez, 2008; Taylor, 2010). In a situation where students' assessment scores are low due to a low level of CRT, schools and students are being punished. Providing *all* teachers with access in how to best meet the needs of ELLs and other CLD (culturally and linguistically diverse) students could help resolve this stressful issue. Townsend (2002) criticizes this situation as, "Leaving no teacher behind." Her research supports the notion that teacher education programs should do more to include the teaching of "culturally responsive pedagogy" (p.729). This will help to (CLD) combat the dramatic differences in test scores amongst students from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Taylor (2010) would agree as shown from the statement, "even while it is clear that culturally and linguistically diverse students have the greatest need for quality instructional programs, many researchers argue that they are less likely to be taught with the most effective evidence-based instruction"(p. 24).

As is well documented in the literature, although there is some support for the goal of teaching teachers to be more competent working with ELLs and other CLD students, often that goal is not realized in practice (and teachers do not acquire needed skills). In my limited experience with two teacher education programs, I can recognize limits that sound like they are common to a lot of programs and I can also identify a few efforts (like those I will focus on later in this thesis) that provide suggestions regarding how to better prepare teachers to succeed with ELLs and/or CLD students in order to become a culturally responsive teacher or CRT.

The term CRT will be used throughout this research. Brown (2007) defines a culturally responsive teacher (CRT) as one who “contains the special knowledge, skills, processes, and experiences essential...to be successful when teaching students from CLD [culturally and linguistically diverse] backgrounds” (p. 61). To expand on Brown’s definition, Villegas and Lucas (2002, p. 20) emphasize that the knowledge, skills, processes and experiences necessary would create teachers whom:

(a) are socially conscious, (b) have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, (c) see themselves as responsible for and capable of bringing about change to make schools more equitable, (d) understand how learners construct knowledge and are capable of promoting knowledge construction, (e) know about the lives of their students, (f) design instruction that builds on what their students already know while stretching them beyond the familiar.

A CRT does not necessarily need to possess an ESL/TESOL endorsement. The issue is knowledge, not formal credentials. Still, a CRT should have the knowledge of second language learning or acquisition of languages (Lucas, Villegas & Gonzalez, 2008, Taylor, 2010).

The university where I received my undergraduate degree in elementary education required pre-service teachers to take a course in “Multicultural Education”; however, this was not effective in addressing the pedagogical needs to be a CRT. It simply was exposure to the diverse student populations teachers might encounter in their classrooms. Villegas and Lucas (2002 p. 21) call this a “superficial treatment of multicultural issues.”

Reeves and Hamann (2008) claimed a lack of CRT pedagogical practices being taught to *all* pre-service teachers throughout the entire state. They stated, “Nebraska’s main teacher preparation response to the presence of newcomers is the creation of an ESL endorsement (which means the challenges or new opportunities presented by newcomers are conceptualized as entirely linguistic in nature), and only teachers seeking an ESL endorsement need to worry about coursework in ESL” (p. 59).

This is obviously worrisome because not all pre-service teachers attempt to become ESL certified. Therefore many Nebraskan teachers, like teachers across the U.S., are entering the teaching field without the pedagogical knowledge necessary to successfully teach culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students <sup>1</sup>. Villegas and Lucas (2002) echoed this concern about the education of teachers throughout the United States with, “because added courses are often optional, students can complete their teacher education programs without receiving any preparation whatsoever in issues of diversity” (p. 20). As did, Reagan (1997, p. 186) with the statement, “pre-service teachers, in short, receive virtually no formal training in linguistics, language acquisition, or in areas related to dealing with language minority students”. In sum if we want better school outcomes for CLDs, we need to be encouraging our universities’ teacher education programs to include course work and/or field experiences that help teachers become CRTs. (Lucas, Villegas & Gonzalez, 2008; Regan, 1997; Reeves & Hamann 2008; Taylor, 2010). The remaining

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that since Reeves and Hamann (2008) was published that the UNL elementary education program has added a two-credit hour requirement for all teachers to student ELL instructional issues.



sections of this thesis outline what some of that coursework and field experience might entail.

### **Experience/Introduction**

As a current elementary and middle school Spanish teacher, my interest in language and the pedagogies of teaching language learners continues to expand, particularly in the area of TESOL<sup>2</sup>. Thus I have opted to obtain a certification in ESL, as well as an M.A. in education. As a requirement for the ESL endorsement, students need to spend a certain amount of time in an ESL setting/classroom, but, under the supervision of my graduate school advisors, I responded to that requirement in a relatively unorthodox fashion. I chose to spend time as a language learner in Spain taking Spanish courses with other second language learners as well as a “mainstream” language acquisition class.

In addition to my experience in Spain, my advisors and I elected several dual-language placements in an urban Midwestern district. While there I observed and/or assisted with classes. Due to my first-hand experience as a second language learner in Spain, when I was in the dual-language placements, I would constantly think back to my experiences as in Spain and what I could do, or what teachers within the classrooms where I was observing could do to make classroom instruction more accessible to CLDs.

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<sup>2</sup> The literature includes various terms for teaching English to non-native speakers of that language. These include ESL (English as a Second Language), ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), ELL (literally English language learner, which means the course name referred as much to who was being taught as the topic), and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), among many others. The differentiation among these terms in this document is incidental and not intended to highlight fine-grained distinctions.

I recorded my observations of both environments in a journal during the fall of 2010 when I was in Spain for eight weeks and later in the dual language environments. Aware that my ESL endorsement is K-12, within the dual-language placement, I spent four days at an elementary school, three days at a middle school and two days at a high school. (All three of these schools are part of the same feeder network, with the elementary school sending most of its graduates to the middle school and the middle school sending most of its graduates to the high school)

While at the elementary school I stayed in a fourth grade room where they spent their morning using the Spanish language and the afternoons using the English language. The content switched every other day in order for students to hear the content in both languages. During this time I was able to assist students with questions, lead reading groups and observe each subject being taught.

During my time at the middle school, I spent one day with a 6<sup>th</sup> grade language arts class that was taught in Spanish. The language used depended on the teacher at the middle school. These same students spent the next day with a different language arts teacher with English being the medium for the language arts instruction. I followed the same kids on that second day to the other language arts instructor. On the third day I spent time with an ELL teacher. She worked with a handful of struggling students on a pull-out basis, working with them on basic reading or study skills.

My time at the high school was divided between dual-language courses and ELL courses. In the dual-language courses the language used to deliver the content changed every other day. For example, in the algebra course that I observed one day the instructor used English and the next day that same instructor used Spanish. This course was open to all students (although for logical reasons monolingual students were discouraged from enrolling). At the high school, the ELL classes varied depending on content and level of English proficiency.

The following paragraphs offer reflections about particular experiences I encountered in the dual-language placement, and from my own experience as a second language learner in Spain. These experiences and observations should call attention to the importance and need of culturally responsive teachers in any content area or classroom.

### **Reflection 1**

As an exchange student walking into my first content-area class, I was quite nervous. I remember thinking, would I be the only non-native Spanish speaker? Would anyone know English? Will the teacher be nice? I sat down in the “T” zone, what I have been told is the optimal area to sit in a classroom. Hoping this would calm some nerves, maybe I would blend in here. Right away as we were waiting for class to begin a girl asked me a question in Spanish that I could not answer. I just gave her a blank stare in return with a smile. She was not completely appalled as she had chosen to sit next to me and did know that there would be a student in the class (i.e., me) who was not from Spain. She asked me in English, “Do you speak English?”

I replied, “yes, do you?” and again, offered a smile.

She said, “a little.”

It was a comforting way to start the class. Someone was aware of my situation. I was a Spanish language learner and welcome as such.

The teacher began the class by taking roll. My name was not on her list, but she was aware that I would be there. She knew because I had met with her ahead of time to inform her that I knew her content, as I had a similar class in the United States, but that I was there because I wanted to get better at discussing that content in a new language. This content class was for me a chance to practice my language.

The teacher was more than willing to accept me into her class and help me with any language deficiencies. She also spoke English. When asking if I were present, she took the time to explain to the students who I was, an exchange student from the U.S., and she also mentioned that I would be a good person to practice English with. She even asked if anyone needed help with English. The students looked pleased. Several students raised their hands indicating they would welcome the opportunity to practice English with me (we only ever practiced in short conversations during class). This gesture made me feel so much more comfortable with my teacher and my classmates. My language skills were

understood as an attraction or resource. And the idea of exchanging skills (helping my Spanish in return for helping their English) was celebrated.

I have fond memories of this teacher, and would consider her to be a CRT, as she highlighted my strengths, affirmed my previous knowledge even though I could not communicate it well and found strategies, such as asking peers to serve as a tutor or printing class notes ahead of time, to make learning possible for me. If she had not been a CRT I fear I would have felt miserable in that classroom. I cannot imagine learning from a non-culturally responsive teacher. I would have been too overwhelmed, too nervous all of the time, inhibiting my ability to succeed.

## **Reflection 2**

While observing a mainstream high school U.S. history class (for just two days), which also included ELLs, I could not help but notice the abundance of other CLD students in addition to the ELLs. This made me think of Harklau (1994) who conducted a study of the instruction ELLs receive in mainstream classes versus the instruction received in a sheltered ESL room. The study covered a span of three years, in one high school, where students moved through the ESL levels before they were mainstreamed—a similar pathway to the program that I observed. Harklau followed the students each year and was able to get a better understanding of the effects of different kinds of instruction on students, the school, and teachers.

Harklau (1994) discovered that in the sheltered ESL classroom students received more explicit instruction and feedback that ultimately improved learning. In the high school where Harklau conducted her research many mainstream classrooms were organized around teacher-led discussions. Harklau stated that teacher-led discussions have potential to be beneficial for ELLs in they provide rich input. However, relying too much on a lecture type medium for students to receive information can be difficult for language learners if there is not an adjustment made to make input more obtainable. Adjustments could include: “reducing the speed and complexity of the speech; increasing repetition, pausing and comprehension checks; and contextualizing abstract concepts through the use of...maps or photos, graphs or graphic organizers...” (p.249), points also made in Meltzer and Hamann’s work (2004, 2005) regarding ELLs and adolescent literacy.

An additional problem ELLs may encounter in the mainstream classroom is being placed in a “low-track” class. In these classes Harklau (1994) wrote that often low-track classes are viewed as being easier for ELLs, when quite the opposite is true. Low-track classes often do not provide the interactions that high-track classes do (Oakes, 1985). Instead these classes rely on teacher-directed activities and individual seatwork (Harklau, 1994, p.250). Lucas and Villegas (2002), encourage the same constructivist views—holding all students to high expectations and promoting engagement and participation amongst students.

In the mainstream class where I observed there were a variety of races and ethnicities, again further emphasizing the importance of all teachers possessing an understanding on

how to be a CRT. Prior to beginning the class, the teacher greeted me warmly and confirmed that this was an “inclusion class” meaning the class included ELLs and students who were in special education. In this particular section of a U.S. history class, however, the students appeared to be in charge, or perhaps it is more apt to say no one was in charge at all. It seemingly lacked rules and routines and, perhaps most importantly, respect. I regret that I did not ask the teacher about her professional preparation (although that might have made her defensive). As it was, only a small percentage of students completed the work assigned and/or participated on the day I observed, and the teacher appeared stressed as soon as the class began. This was a fraught environment and the absence of culturally responsive teaching was palpable.

On my second day in this class, there was a substitute teacher. The substitute used a movie as an incentive for keeping the class under control. The students were instructed to quietly do their work (an open-ended study guide where students could find the answers in order within their textbook), while also watching the video. When they became loud the substitute would threaten to turn off the video, which sufficed as a discipline tool to quiet the students down again. As I watched the students next to me and around the class I noticed only 5 or 6 out of a class of at least 20 working on the assignment. The rest remained relatively quiet in order to finish the video. The substitute did not circulate to ensure students were working or to see if students needed assistance. I cannot say that any student in the class learned much that day.

This observation seemed to mirror many of the concerns Harklau (1994) and Taylor (2010) discussed in their separate studies. One area of concern was that the ELLs were placed in a low-track class. Perhaps hinging from this first act, they appeared not to know how to be an appropriate audience for a lecture; they did not receive explicit instruction on how to complete the assignment; and any assignment given was expected to be completed individually. There was little room in that classroom for ELLs to practice language and receive explicit and immediate feedback, although the other CLDs in the room hardly received better.

Both Lucas, Villegas and Gonzalez (2008) and Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2007) would argue that this classroom needed more explicit directions and more opportunities for students to speak (appropriately about the task at hand), especially the ELLs. They might also suggest for the teacher (the original stressed teacher and the substitute) to be more aware of the vocabulary within her content area in order to make the content more accessible. Knowledge of the language being used in a content area can assist teachers in identifying the language demands in any given lessons. After identifying demands she would be better able to scaffold the lessons, find appropriate extra-linguistic support such as pictures or graphs, and provide students with learning strategies in as highlighting, outlining and defining key vocabulary (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005).

### **Reflection 3**

In another class at this same high school where ELLs were sheltered from mainstream students and negotiated a modified curriculum. In this second environment, I noticed a



dramatic difference. The students were actively participating and receiving immediate feedback from the teacher, all of which appeared to be positive and appropriate. To be sure, this was a different teacher and different content area, so a facile conclusion that sheltered immersion works better than mainstreaming should be resisted. What can be said is that I witnessed a CRT in this second classroom, but did not in the first classroom.

This was a level 3-4 ESL class, the highest level for ELLs before they would become mainstreamed within this particular school. The content was focused on the English language. There seemed to be a strict routine, students began with a daily oral language exercise, then checked it over as a class with students volunteering their answers. Later they were given a worksheet to work on in small groups. There appeared to be a positive relationship between students and teacher in the 3-4 ESL class. I journaled about the difficulty of the worksheet, and how I, a native-English speaker, would need to say the statement aloud *and* confer with a friend to ensure I correctly identified and fixed the error. Fortunately, the pedagogical organization of the class meant that the 3-4 ESL students had that opportunity.

Consistent with Meltzer and Hamann (2005), the 3-4 ESL teacher did a great job using routines that involved explicit instructions on how to complete each activity for that day. The students and teacher in this room appeared much less stressed and frustrated than in the U.S. history class I observed. The teacher seemed to be a CRT, with high expectations of his students. Moreover, he knew it was important for students to converse in class. Yet, unfortunately, as Valdés (2001) has lamented about a typical classroom in

California, this was only with other ELLs, a missed opportunity to engage with a student fluent in English.

I do recall a time in the class a girl responded to the question in Spanish, to which he replied, "I do not know what you are saying, please use English." There seemed to be a common respect, as he appreciated the girl's participation, affirming she probably knew the answer or did indeed have something relevant to say, he just could not understand it. The girl did translate her response to English with help from peers. Allowing students to assist in translations is a teaching strategy a CRT may use, as this allow students access to the content (Lucas, Villegas, & Gonzalez, 2008). The respectful way the teacher chose to respond demonstrates that while monolingualism is an obstacle, it is not an impermeable barrier to CRT.

#### **Reflection 4**

In the same school as Reflections 2 and 3, I observed similar teaching CRT strategies for students in a 3-4 ESL Biology class and a level 1-2 ESL General Science class. The same teacher taught both classes and spent a great deal of time reviewing tough vocabulary and concepts, while allowing the students to take the vocabulary and make sense of it, either by saying it in their own language, making gestures, or providing strategies to help students remember concepts, such as the replication of cells and the terms meiosis and mitosis. I wrote in my journal how surprised I was that *I* learned the difference between meiosis and mitosis better from this teacher than when I was first introduced to the concept in high school. The repetition helped me tremendously, and I noted that with

each repetition the students appeared to be getting better at identifying how many cells would be produced. The teacher did a fabulous job providing graphics and stories to assist students in remembering the concepts and vocabulary. Students particularly seemed to enjoy teaching each other how to say the vocabulary words in each others' languages.

I remember in another of the classes I attended with this same biology teacher, students were provided real examples of some of the animals they were discussing. The students were super excited about this! When it came time to classifying animals on their assignment, they were also allowed to work in groups and to use the book. I was slightly concerned that students did not know how to use the book efficiently in order to search for answers. Perhaps the CRT overlooked the need to explicitly teach how to efficiently use the book, or maybe the CRT had once taught students to use the book, they just needed review. Regardless, the students did figure out how to find the answers after asking for assistance.

Overall, the science teacher appeared to be a CRT. He used extra-linguistic support—the use of pictures, graphs and real-life teams. He modified or scaffolded the text by identifying key vocabulary words, and he also used a lot of repetition. These are all strategies a CRT would use (Harklau, 1994; Lucas, Villegas & Gonzalez, 2008; Meltzer & Hamann, 2005; Taylor, 2010; Villegas & Lucas 2002). I would have liked to observe him explicitly teaching how to use the textbook to find the answers to the assigned worksheet, but that is just a reminder that not all of the instruction a CRT engages in is equally effective.

**Reflection 5**

My final observation at the high school was completed in level 1-2 ESL room, where the content was the English language. The teacher in this classroom also had an endorsement in Spanish. When native-Spanish speaking students struggled with concepts, directions or vocabulary, she was able to provide the same dialogue in Spanish that she had given in English (out of a class of 16 or so, five were native Spanish speakers. The students seemed to sit in table groups with students who shared the same language as them in order to help each other out). A specific example of this occurred one day during a reading exercise where students were asked to place the most logical vocabulary word in the blanks to create a story. The isolated vocabulary word choices were a bit difficult. The teacher, first provided synonyms of the vocabulary, then concrete examples and/or illustrations. Although the students did struggle, they were able to finish the lesson with the assistance of culturally responsive teaching strategies such as scaffolding and allowing the students to work together.

This particular teacher was very willing to share and explain her thought processes with the students and me about routines and how to locate answers (she shared a lot of information with me about personal teaching experiences). The knowledge she possessed about her students was impressive. She knew a lot about their home life, their prior educational experiences, and their English speaking abilities. This knowledge greatly assisted her in teaching decisions. In the lesson I described above, she knew in advance that students may struggle with the vocabulary and was prepared to offer examples. One

prominent example of her overall understanding of her students was demonstrated on the day that the city was expected to receive its first snowstorm of the season. The teacher communicated to me that from experience in the past, she anticipated some students from southeast Asia might not be aware of the importance in such weather of wearing shoes and socks, as well as mittens and hats. As I looked around the room I noticed the students she worried about were wearing sandals. Before students dismissed that day, she made sure to remind students that with snow coming everyone should wear the proper attire and take precautions when traveling to school. While this may not constitute an overwhelming or dramatic example of CRT, that is kind of the point. CRT is manifest in little gestures of responsiveness, as well as more dramatic ones.

### **Reflection 6**

It was interesting to compare the instruction the ELLs received in their respective high school classes. Whether they were mainstreamed or in a sheltered ESL class proved to be quite a different learning environment for the students. Although my observation was limited to just one high school and a couple days with these particular classes and I saw just one mainstream class, I found my observations in line with that of Harklau (1994). Overall, from my findings within the school, despite it being a dual-language school, the current instruction received in an ESL sheltered classes seemed to best meet the needs of the learners. This leads me to believe that perhaps not all teachers (including some in the dual language program) within this diverse high school were practicing pedagogies of a CRT. This was a disappointing conclusion because I had hoped (seeing how the school seemingly prides itself on being a dual-language school) that I would be able to witness

CRTs within all content areas, not just ESL specific classes, nor those classes which are dual-language. I am not pointing this out to claim that one instructional format is more effective than another (my sample is way too small to sustain such a claim), but rather as a reminder that if we want pre-service and in-service teachers to get a chance to observe and thereby better understand the educational strategies that best serve CLDs, it may not always be in the anticipated locations that we encounter CRTs modeling inclusive, engaging practices.

### **Reflection 7**

My dual-language middle school experience started with a 5<sup>th</sup> grade language arts class, being taught in Spanish by a native-English speaking teacher (i.e. a teacher teaching in her second language). The majority of the students were native-Spanish speakers, with only four or five native-English speakers. It was fascinating to watch the students switch between the languages during class. Still perhaps reflecting the larger society's greater valuing of English (Freeman, 2000), I noted that most preferred to speak in English even when they were encouraged/required to speak in Spanish. The teacher would kindly remind them to respond in Spanish. I journaled about how impressed I was with the students being able to perform such complex linguistic functions in two languages, such as reading and journaling.

After I got over my amazement with these students' abilities, I noticed and analyzed the learning environment. It was very calm, students knew the expectations, and the teacher promoted high expectations and affirmed students' English responses, but kindly

redirected them to respond in Spanish (the target language for that day). The students treated each other with respect. It was encouraging to watch the native-Spanish speakers assist the native-English speakers when they struggled. It was evident that the teacher understood the challenges of being a language learner and put forth the effort to ease these challenges of her students by allowing students to assist one another. She was an excellent model for students of a language learner, and furthermore, an excellent model for change (as discussed in Godley, et al, 2006 and Villegas and Lucas, 2002) as she, a native-English speaker, showed respect and respect was given in return for students who were not native-English speakers.

### **Reflection 8**

Within the same school, I followed the same 5<sup>th</sup> grade students to their language arts class that was conducted in English the next day. I noticed the same calm, encouraging learning environment. The teacher of this class, also a native-English speaker, was much more excited about having me in the room. I guessed this attitude was probably due to her overall concern for her students to become successful with the language. With another native-English speaking adult in the room they could receive more assistance, ideally promoting more learning. (I was viewed as a helper in this room, not just an observer).

While assisting with this class, I journaled about the differences I had observed in the reading levels of the students in Spanish versus their reading skills in English. The majority of the students appeared to show English reading levels lower than that of their

Spanish reading levels. (This was congruent with the probably related fact that most had Spanish as their first language). I then wondered if the state and federal assessments would reflect that although one language may be stronger than the other, these 5<sup>th</sup> grade students could read in *two* languages. This is not something a school, its students and teachers, should be punished for (or overlooked for). Unfortunately, schools typically receive a warning if their English reading assessment scores are not up to par with other schools and/or do not show improvement. As Freeman (2000) noted, even if the school embraces two official languages, the larger society shares a message that only one of those languages—English—ultimately matters.

As Townsend (2002) discussed the importance of “leaving no teacher behind” by exposing teachers to culturally responsive pedagogy, my observations of the CRTs of this 5<sup>th</sup> grade leave me to wonder if students assessments aptly reflect what I witnessed. If not, additional measurement strategies should be further pursued to ensure students’ linguistic accomplishment is being accurately reflected.

### **Reflection 9**

My final observations were recorded over four days in an elementary, dual-language, 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. Of the students, one or two out of twenty or so were native-English speakers, while the rest were native-Spanish speakers. The teacher was also a native-English speaker. The language of instruction was to be Spanish in the morning on one day and English the next day, or English in the afternoon on one day and Spanish the next day. Through this changing back and forth, students received instruction in both



languages every day and heard the different content areas in both languages. I thought this was a good strategy because the vocabulary and concepts in each content area were reinforced in each language. They complemented each other. Perhaps a student may be stronger in one language over the other, although they may not understand everything being taught, they still had an idea of what was going on since they had heard it in their preferred language just the day before.

Just as I had noted in my middle school experience, I was again amazed at the capability of the students to effectively communicate in *two* languages in a variety of content areas. I was also amazed at how eager the students were to participate and how passionate the teacher was towards her students. During a science lesson about electricity, conducted in Spanish, she explained the concept of negative and positive charges, by physically having students represent the electrons and protons. Girl students would represent one type of the particles and a boy would represent the other. Then the teacher had the students walk around and around in a circle and say stop where girls partner with other girl students, however, one girl would partner with a boy showing the difference in charges. Clearly this concept was and is still complicated for me to understand, but the teacher did a great job explaining it to the students, by using multiple examples, much better than I could ever articulate, the students appeared to understand.

To complement this lesson, the next day, in English, the teacher challenged the students to create light out of a battery and wires. There was a short discussion about the different electric charges before the students began, then they set off to experiment. This was an

excellent hands-on, inquiry-based activity that a CRT would do, the expectations were high, scaffolding was in place, and students were excited, communicating in the desired instructional language about their discoveries.

### **CRT Dispositions**

As I think about my nine reflections, what I have read on this topic, and the issue of preparing teachers to be CRTs, I am convinced that the central task is to develop and integrate five dispositions: (a) sociocultural awareness (b) an affirming attitude towards *all* students (c) the commitment to act as an agent of change (d) learning about all students and (e) using culturally responsive teaching practices in teacher education programs. A little artificially (as the point is that they should be integrated), let me explain each of these in turn.

As illustrated in my reflections, many teachers who deal specifically with ELLs or teachers who teach in a dual-language program exercise the dispositions of a culturally responsive teacher (CRT). The dispositions of a CRT, as discussed by Villegas and Lucas (2002) include: sociocultural awareness, an affirming attitude, commitment to act as agents of change, constructivist views of learning, learning about students and use culturally responsive teaching practices. However, as evidenced by research, we know that these dispositions need improvement in many classrooms across the country. In my observation this was needed even in a dual-language program (where I thought all teachers would have been trained in the dispositions of a CRT given the student population).

It is my hope (based on the same review process that led me to author this thesis) that teachers, teacher educators and administrators can make certain that *all* teachers have been trained as CRTs to further ensure that *all* students, explicitly including ELLs and other CLD students, have the best possible opportunities to learn and demonstrate their learnings. So the question becomes: How can we make certain these dispositions are attainable to all teachers, so as to not leave any teacher behind?

I think this begins with improving the relationships between schools and universities. My experiences as apparently the first student at my university to observe in a nearby city's dual immersion program illustrate both the willingness of the districts to be partners, but also the comparative paucity of collaboration (particularly of collaboration in new ways). If we continue to open up the communication between the two institutions, we can help pre-service teachers know what they need before stepping foot into a classroom as its leader. Allowing in-service teachers more opportunities to attend professional developments or seminars in the area of working with students from a diverse population would also be recommended. But, speaking autobiographically, I think the biggest prospective source of insight is loosely guided observation. With a journal and the only loosely defined task of thinking about whether overseas experiences and/or site visits to a dual immersion program would be helpful for ELL teachers, I came away with the conviction that learning through this strategy *avails* is relevant to *all* teachers.

Townsend (2002) and Villegas and Lucas (2002) and now me, would all suggest to teacher education programs that the most effective way to teach the culturally responsive teaching (CRT) dispositions is not by simply adding another course. CRT needs to be embedded throughout teacher education courses and those learning to become CRTs need to see it in action (like I did). Villegas and Lucas (2002) add that teacher educators *need to model* CRT practices in addition to teaching about them.

### **Sociocultural Awareness**

To assist pre-service or in-service teachers in becoming more socioculturally aware, these teachers must engage in a personal reflection about the groups they belong to, such as their social class, ethnicity, race, gender and language. Upon reflecting individuals should consider how belonging to each group has shaped their lives (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The groups we belong to can shape our behaviors and language. For example, we may use a more informal language register and act different amongst friends and family members compared to the language and behavior we use in the classroom.

Without considering how belonging to each group has influenced our life we will not understand why our students speak or act the way they do. Townsend (2002, p. 73) writes, “by maintaining ethnocentric views, we fail to recognize *students’* beliefs and behavioral standards...we ignore [the students’ beliefs and behavioral standards] and force students to adopt our cultural systems.” By neglecting students’ beliefs and behavioral standards we open up more opportunities for resistance in the classroom and we lose out on many learning opportunities that exist because of having a diverse

classroom—every student could have different thoughts and perspectives that aid classmates' consideration of the content. Demonstrating and teaching about being socioculturally aware is essential for creating culturally responsive students.

Without my experience in Spain and the experience of working directly with ELLs and CLD students my sociocultural awareness would not be at the level I think that it currently is. I know what it is like to feel like the tentative, unsure, outsider and how good it feels to be acknowledge and actively included. Now, I have become an advocate for pre-service and in-service teachers to have a similar experience as myself so that they, too, are able to most effectively teach and model understanding for the diverse students in classrooms today. If I had not ventured out to communities different from my own I would not have experienced the similar struggles many of our students face. This understanding helps create empathy between teacher and student.

### **An affirming attitude towards *all* students**

Once an individual becomes more socioculturally aware, they are more apt to demonstrate an affirming, empathetic attitude towards students. This disposition promotes a mutual respect between student and teacher, and if modeled in front of students, it can also promote respect between students. A respectful classroom environment is essential to advance learning. An individual with an affirming attitude acknowledges the existence and *validates* the many ways we all think, talk, behave and learn (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

I thought the ESL general science and biology teacher and the middle school language arts teachers that I observed displayed affirming attitudes quite well. Each validated students' language and, thus their knowledge, by allowing students to express the names of the animals in their native language. Or in the case of the middle school language arts teachers, they both at times recognized that students knew the information in one language and struggled at communicating it in the other language. Many other teachers whom I had the opportunity to observe showed this same understanding and affirming attitude. Never did I hear a CRT, try to "correct", or undermine a students' choice speech, the teachers may have asked students to use a different language (to the one targeted at that moment in the dual immersion program or to one the instructor needed to be able to understand), but even then the teachers first validated the students' response or initial understanding. Again, a diverse classroom can lead to a multitude of learning, as every student may have a unique perspective to add.

In the case of the ESL biology and general science room, students also demonstrated affirming attitudes, as they were eager to learn from each other. Why would we not honor students' prior knowledge? It leads to a greater understanding of the material. Townsend, (2002, p. 729) writes, "There are many [student] behaviors and attitudes teachers clearly cannot change, nor would they want to".

### **The commitment to act as an agent of change**

It is easiest to understand how the importance of acting as a classroom agent of change, if an individual already comports themselves with the previous two dispositions:

sociocultural awareness and an affirming attitude. All dispositions work together to create an ideal learning environment. Godley, et al (2006) states, “responding productively [or affirming and validating students’ beliefs and language] to...diversity in the classroom requires that teachers become willing to teach for social change” (p. 33). Villegas and Lucas remind us that an agent of change should work to “promote the development of empathy for students of diverse backgrounds, nurture their passion and idealism for making a difference in students’ lives and promote activism outside as well as inside the classroom” (2002, p. 25).

As I stated earlier, after being a student abroad and immersing myself in diverse environments where my beliefs and behavior may not have been the same as the majority of the people around me, and where I may have been challenged to adopt others’ beliefs and behaviors, I find it much easier to develop and promote the importance of empathy in the classroom. The elementary teacher and the 5<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish language arts teacher at the middle school whom I observed excellently displayed the promotion of empathy towards others. Both of these mentioned teachers had been—and still are—language learners. They could relate to the difficulties the students experienced and served as models for students in the language learning process.

### **Constructivist views of learning**

A teacher who displays this disposition knows the importance of using students’ prior knowledge to assist in obtaining new knowledge. Researchers call this, “building a bridge.” Building a bridge involves once again using an affirming attitude and validating

student's prior knowledge to accelerate learning in the classroom. Villegas and Lucas, (2002) state that students' "ways of speaking and thinking are considered *resources* for further development rather than problems that need to be remedied" (p. 25). A great example of this disposition in use is the time the ESL general science and biology teacher introduced animals. He noticed his students recognized the animals in their native language and then explained more about them as the students made sense of the new information by using gestures, sounds, illustrations and translating amongst each other to help them digest the new information.

### **Learning about all students**

The importance of learning about *all* students is best stated in the quote, "responsive teachers strive to know as much as possible about the children they teach to facilitate their learning" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 27). Without proper knowledge of about the students in the classroom we would not be able to maximize the benefits of constructivist teaching, nor use the most effective teaching strategies. Had the 1-2 ESL teacher not known about the backgrounds of her students, she would not know that addressing the area of winter weather would be important. From the initial impetus to have students made aware of the proper clothing to wear during snow, she might then be able to explain the concept of "ice" and "snow" and thereby scaffold new learning.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices**

After acquiring the preceding dispositions, it is only natural to begin using culturally responsive teaching practices. Culturally responsive teaching practices include the use of



inquiry, and/or “meaningful, purposeful, collaborative and intellectually rigorous” tasks for learners to participate in (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 28). To successfully implement such learning activities—and to maximize overall learning—teachers must make use of all of the dispositions. Once they have deepened their sociocultural awareness they will gain that affirming attitude towards students that will, in turn, encourage teachers to use constructivist views of learning in their classroom. To implement these views of learning they must execute teaching practices that essentially place the learner or student at the front of the learning stage. A CRT knows the value high of expectations and understands the strategies necessary to help students meet those expectations, such as using a variety of resources and scaffold. Furthermore, a CRT understands the importance of “building a bridge” between the students’ home lives and their life at school. A CRT makes those home-to-school connections to design learning activities that will optimize learning.

It is fair to say that nearly all teachers I observed displayed some culturally responsive teaching practices, as nearly all the teachers displayed several of the mentioned dispositions that would indicate they are culturally responsive teachers. This is encouraging news. However, as research and my observations both indicate, the CRTs I observed are not as common as they should be. These CRTs have experience either as being language learner themselves, or they have experience implementing the five dispositions within a diverse classroom.

### **Concrete examples of ideas to increase culturally responsive pedagogy in teacher education program**

Although becoming a CRT requires experience, teacher education programs can do more to prepare pre-service teachers' for the journey of becoming an experienced CRT.

Increasing exposure to the pedagogy of culturally responsive teaching in teacher education courses would be the first suggestion. This could include highlighting the dispositions as described above. Students could complete a journal reflecting upon the many groups they belong to and the influence belonging to these groups brings to their daily lives. I would argue that exposure to a diverse classroom or promoting a study abroad experience for pre-service teachers is essential to truly understand what an ELL or CLD student may experience daily.

Townsend (2002) would agree that exposure is necessary to fully understand how the dispositions work in a classroom. In her study, pre-service teachers, from their first semester, spent two days a week in a high-poverty or urban school. This exposure continued until the students' final semester when they completed their student teaching in a similar setting. Throughout their experiences students in Townsend's study were required to journal enhancing self-reflections leading to improving their teaching craft. Students also had the opportunity to attend seminars on urban special education and professional issues. This is an ideal addition to teacher education programs because students are able to practice the theories and ideas they learn in class, while gaining experience in implementing the dispositions of a CRT. Pre-service teachers fortunate to participate in such an endeavor will learn early on the importance of being a CRT.

Furthermore, they will be able to practice these dispositions in a safe environment under the guidance of an experienced CRT. If they do not display the dispositions of a CRT they risk the chance of meeting resistance from learners. That would not be a pleasant experience.

Reeves and Hamann, 2008, also conducted an applied study that was designed to increase pre-service teachers' awareness of culturally responsive teaching. In their study students enrolled in an online course were assigned readings where they would discuss the implications of the readings amongst each other on a discussion forum. A group of students were also assigned a mentor who could provide insight from their years of experience in issues related to diverse classrooms and learners. The mentors and mentees shared dialogue throughout the course as they discussed questions related to diverse classrooms. This included real-life scenarios about communities facing issues of diversity, information related to the reading, and students' own experiences with diverse classrooms. Reeves and Hamann collected over 250 posts from the online discussion boards and reviewed personal reflections the students submitted. One student wrote in a post, "I have been opened to a world of diversity, which is far better than the world I once lived in. I am not saying this transition has been easy, but I have grown to appreciate and love others from different cultures." This attitude indicates that Reeves and Hamann's intent to expose students to the dispositions of culturally responsive teaching had succeeded (at least with this student).

## **Conclusion**

Whether teacher education programs decide to implement practica requirements such as those mentioned in Townsend (2002) or add a mentor-mentee relationship and reflection piece to a course, something must be done to illuminate for pre-service teachers the dispositions of culturally responsive teaching. A CRT will prove to be more successful in our continuously growing diverse classrooms, so the challenge is how to make more of them.

Finally, considering not just my nine reflections shared here, nor just the literature also reviewed here, but also thinking about myself as a still new teacher (in my third year), I know I am not a CRT, in some definitive and unequivocal way. But I am far enough along, and my observations and literature review experiences figure centrally here, to be convinced that becoming a CRT is something to aim for. So as a final thought for teacher preparation efforts, it should be remembered that cross-cultural experiences, in school observations, and classroom study can all be vehicles through which an understanding of the importance of culturally responsive teaching can be fomented. The task is not just to develop such skills, but also to build the desire on the part of the teacher for such learning. Our pre-service and in-service efforts need to build a desire in more and more people to become CRTs. That's how we will have more them.

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