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Colorblind Nonaccommodative Denial: Implications for Teachers’ Meaning Perspectives Toward their Mexican-American English Learners

Socorro Herrera and Amanda Rodriguez Morales

Pre-reading Questions

Many parts of the United States are facing an increasing number of immigrant students. Focusing on mostly White teachers at a junior high school, which enrolls predominantly Mexican immigrant students, Socorro Herrera and Amanda R. Morales examine these teachers’ belief system. The authors identify the perspective of colorblind nonaccommodative denial among these teachers.

• What is a colorblind perspective? How does it affect everyday teaching practices?
• How would teachers justify their not accommodating minority students? What are the educational consequences of nonaccommodation?

Introduction

Improving the learning experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse Mexican-American students in the United States is a complex task critical to the future stability and quality of life in the United States. A recent U.S. Census Bureau report indicates “Hispanics accounted for half of the 2.9 million population growth from 2003 to
2004 and now constitute one-seventh of all people in the United States” (Jelinek, 2005). Conversely, Hispanic Latinas/Latinos constitute the highest dropout rates of any population in the nation, 350,000 per year (Montemayor & Mendoza, 2004). In the last decade, as a pro-active approach, researchers and reflective practitioners alike have sought to evaluate, understand, and improve the conditions of schools for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students.

Theory and research has shown that teachers, administrators, and the overall school climate they create playa critical role in the educational success of all students (Baker, 1996; Banks & Lynch, 1986; Benard, 1997; Carr & Klaussen, 1997; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Johnson, 2002; Palmer, 2003). For better or for worse, the social climate of schools exists as the incubator for attitudes and ways of thinking about race and class that in turn affect teaching and learning (Chang, 2003; Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Johnson, 2002). For historically oppressed peoples, determining whether discriminatory acts are based on race or socioeconomic status is not always easy. Due to social and historical factors unique to the United States, the oppressed often possess characteristics that make them a target for both. As specified by Helms (1990), “racism is a complex ideology that occurs at individual, cultural, and institutional levels” (p. 4). Because the evidence of its existence in a system is often subtle, the marriage of racism and power proves to be a subversive phenomenon that is difficult to identify and evaluate in school policy and practice (Chang, 2003; Walker, Shafer, & Iiams, 2004). Larson and Ovando (2001) discuss how this is commonly perpetuated in schools: “When inequity has been institutionalized, teachers and administrators no longer have to be biased to continue biased practices; we merely have to do our jobs and maintain the normal practices of the systems we have inherited” (p. 3).

With Mexican Americans being the most demographically relevant population impacting schools today, it is important to evaluate the implications that this dynamic has for their learning, language development, and educational experience (Chen & Goldring, 1992; Contreras & Lee, 1990; Montemayor & Mendoza, 2004; Valencia, 1991). As many researchers have argued, there are few studies that evaluate mainstream teachers’ attitudes toward Mexican Americans, and even fewer that focus on how those attitudes and deeply embedded beliefs translate into action regarding second language learners (Chang,
These beliefs-in-action shape decisions for programming, curriculum and instruction, and access to opportunities for Mexican-American students.

A distinct avoidance of honest discourse on cultural and linguistic difference perpetuates misconceptions that lead educators to pursue superficial strategies and procedural experiences with racial diversity in an attempt to lessen the issues they have with teaching this population. Unfortunately, these types of treatments (e.g., discussion of cultural difference solely within the context of food and festivals) are known to have little impact in fundamentally altering majority teacher and student perceptions or Mexican-American students’ performance. Because race impacts both student and teacher identity development, at best these treatments may increase teachers’ tolerance of these students (Chang, 2003). They cannot, however, move educators beyond the surface to consider and address the underlying issues of inequity, discrimination, White privilege, and institutional racism that permeate our schools (Nieto, 1995; Youngs & Youngs, 2001).

The chronic failure of educators to address these issues with honesty strongly reflects the need for a specific theoretical framework to examine why. This framework would enable insightful descriptions and interpretations of teachers’ perspectives that shape not just their discourse but, more importantly, their actions. Therefore, this study is timely by providing one such framework within the context of a psychological meaning perspective. Colorblind nonaccommodative denial is a psychological meaning perspective that sheds light on how the schemes colorblindness and no accommodation impact teaching and learning for CLD students.

The phrase culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) is the most inclusive and descriptive of a student whose culture and/or language differ from the dominant culture or language in his or her social context. The researchers chose to use the term CLD in the place of English-language learner (ELL) to specifically emphasize the needs of those high-risk students in schools who either have been exited out of an ESL program or whose English proficiency scores are just high enough to not qualify for services, monitoring, or support by the school (Buxton, 1999; Chamot & O’Malley, 1994; Escamilla, 1999; New York State Department of Education, 2002).
Theoretical Framework

The term meaning perspective, used by Jack Mezirow (1990), refers to the “structure of assumptions within which one’s past experience assimilates and transforms new experience” (p. 42). This meaning perspective encompasses a habitual set of expectations providing an orienting frame of reference or perceptual filter that one uses in the interpretation of experience. These interpretations regularly take the form of symbolic models, which are the product of past experiences, and which are projected onto the interpretation of current experience. At the same time, a meaning perspective serves as a tacit belief system for the interpretation and evaluation of the meaning of experience.

More specifically, Mezirow (1991) elaborated on three types of such meaning perspectives: epistemic, sociocultural, and psychological. Epistemic meaning perspectives embody the way we know what we know and the uses that we make of the resultant knowledge. Among the factors that shape our epistemic meaning perspectives, Mezirow (1991, p. 43) lists the following: developmental stage perspectives; cognitive/learning/intelligence styles; sensory learning preferences; scope of awareness; global/detail factors; concrete/abstract thinking; and reflectivity.

Sociocultural meaning perspectives represent our ways of believing, involving social norms, cultural or linguistic codes, and social ideologies. According to Mezirow, some factors that shape this perspective are social norms/roles, cultural/language codes, language/truth games, common sense as cultural system, ethnocentrism, prototype/scripts, and philosophies/theories (1991, p. 43).

The third type, psychological meaning perspectives, reflect one’s ways of feeling, involving repressed parental and social prohibitions from childhood that influence adult feelings and behavior. Mezirow has concluded that the following factors shape our psychological meaning perspectives: self-concept; locus of control; tolerance of ambiguity; lost functions; inhibitions; approach/avoidance; and psychological defense mechanisms (1991, p. 43).

Mezirow (1991) believes that our meaning perspectives act as filters on the way we interpret and construe what we experience through our senses. Language and symbolic interaction (communication) personalizes and expands upon these means of interpretation. Additionally, meaning perspectives influence our ways of seeing, our methods of
inquiry, and our actions in context. Not surprisingly, “The most significant transformations in learning are transformations of meaning perspectives” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 38). Such transformations enable more discriminating, inclusive, permeable, and integrative meaning perspectives through critical reflection on the taken-for-granted premises and assumptions of our bio-psycho-cultural history, premises and assumptions that are uncritically assimilated throughout our socialization.

According to Mezirow (1991), each of our meaning perspectives can embody several meaning schemes. In an important differentiation between the two terms, he clarifies that, “A meaning scheme is the particular knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings that become articulated in an interpretation” (p. 44). Meaning schemes are the concrete manifestations of our orientation and expectations (meaning perspectives) and translate these general expectations into specific ones that guide our action.

Analysis of teachers’ discourse in this ethnographic case study indicated a psychological meaning perspective shared among teachers in their day-to-day interactions with Mexican-American junior high school students. As themes emerged, two major areas of implication for this psychological meaning perspective were evidenced: (1) teacher/faculty decisions for programming and classroom management, and (2) their decisions regarding curriculum and instruction for their students, who are predominantly Mexican-American English learners. This chapter will present an overview, the findings, a discussion, and the implications of this psychological meaning perspective, colorblind nonaccommodative denial, as indicated by teachers’ discourse.

Meaning perspectives are, without doubt, a guiding force in interpretation of that which we experience daily. It is important to note that the authors of this piece are both Latinas with meaning perspectives uniquely their own. Herrera is an immigrant whose life, both personal and academic, has been influenced by what it means to be an English-language learner in the United States. Morales’s interpretation is through the lens of a biracial Latina who grew up in the rural Midwest as part of the only family of color in her hometown. The authors took a synergistic approach to interpreting the data with an open heart and mind to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, that their own worlds did not cloud their perceptions of the world-views held by the educators participating in this study.
Context of Study

This study focused on how teachers’ assumptions and beliefs are translated into professional practice in the context of a public junior high school in the southwestern United States. The major findings of the study emerged from the qualitative research question: What meaning perspectives are indicated by teachers’ discourse and action regarding their day-to-day interactions with their Mexican-American junior high school students? From this overarching question, the researchers gained insight into the historical and social context of race relations at this junior high school and the implications they have for their Mexican-American English learners.

According to Mezirow’s transformation theory, which served as the substantive framework for the study, a meaning perspective functions as a structure of assumptions and a belief system through which we interpret and evaluate experience (Mezirow, 1990, 1991). Among the three types identified by Mezirow, findings from this comprehensive study include five distinct meaning perspectives held by teachers in their daily interactions with students. Two of these meaning perspectives are epistemic in nature, two are sociocultural and one is psychological. In this chapter, the authors focus on the finding related to the psychological meaning perspective—colorblind nonaccommodative denial.

Methodology

This research was conceptualized as an ethnographic case study. The design of this study can be summarized in the following design components: (a) development of field relationships; (b) site and sample selection; and (c) data collection and data analysis. Field relationships were developed using ethical strategies for negotiation, exchange, and reciprocity (Jorgensen, 1989). The junior high school chosen for the study will be identified by the pseudonym Valverde. The site for this study is situated within an urban, working-class community in the southwest. The community is comprised of both Mexican Americans who are immigrants and those whose roots are deeply grounded in the community in which they reside. At the time of the study, 75% of the students in the school were of Mexican-American descent, 6% were
African American, and 19% were White non-Hispanic, a term used by the district. Some 85% of the student population was considered economically disadvantaged (a term also used by the district) and 13% received special education services.

While the school had an ESL program for recent immigrants identified as ELLs, a majority of the Mexican-American students at Valverde had been exited from ESL or bilingual programs in elementary school or had gained enough English for basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) prior to entering school to be placed in regular classrooms, even though they came from homes where Spanish was the dominant language (Cummins, 1981). For this reason, the researchers chose to situate the study with content-area teachers in regular classrooms where students’ cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) often was not at a level where full participation in classroom activities was possible, given that little or no modification was being made to instruction (Collier, 1995; Cummins, 1981). Given their difference in language and culture and the lack of experience/training held by the teachers who taught them, the researchers found these students to be at great risk (Cummins, 1989; Herrera & Murry, 200S).

The teacher population at Valverde was typical at the state and national level with the staff being over 85% White. The participant group for this study consisted of 36 White teachers and one Latina teacher. Nine of the participants were male and 28 were female. The range of classroom experience was quite broad with one being a first-year teacher and one teacher going on her 37th year in the classroom. The average years-of-experience for the group was 17. This sample was selected as a bounded system and served as the unit of analysis for the study (Chein, 1981).

Participant observations of classroom instruction, individual and group interviews, reflection sessions (researcher-led group discussions of participants’ practice), and evaluation of participant-generated records constituted the primary sources of data in this case study (Merriam, 1998). All observation sessions and interviews were audio-taped and videotaped. The recording of field notes taken by the researchers accompanied each session of participant observation. The primary documents collected for evaluation included: critical-incident analyses; concept maps; reaction papers; reflective progress reports; cross-cultural platforms; and daily reflective journals prepared by teachers.
The researchers investigated such artifacts and conducted all data as active observers. The problem addressed by the study was concerned with human meanings and interactions as described from the insider’s perspective. Etic coding\(^1\) according to transformation theory, the substantive theoretical framework for this study, initiated data analysis via the constant comparative method (Straus, 1987). These initial and etic codes (e.g., locus of control, approach/avoidance) supported the emic codes\(^2\) (e.g., I don’t see color), categories, and themes drawn from participants’ shared interpretations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

**Colorblind Nonaccommodative Denial: Overview**

The term *colorblind* has been used to refer to persons who are essentially oblivious to, or choose to overlook, differences (whether perceived as differences of skin color, cultural socialization, or ethnicity) among groups of people regarding the manner in which one or another group is perceived and treated by the dominant group in society. The term colorblind, as used in reference to the psychological meaning perspective identified in this chapter, is consistent with Sleeter’s (1995) argument that those persons and institutions that have been described as colorblind are usually also *ethnic-blind* (that is, oblivious to differences among groups of people regarding how members of one or another group perceive themselves in relation to a common, shared historical heritage).

Teachers’ discourse in this study not only indicated colorblindness as a denial of biases (the reduction of anxiety by the unconscious exclusion from the mind of intolerable thoughts, feelings, or facts) but also consequent denial (the refusal to recognize, acknowledge, or confront a need, claim, or request) of accommodation in classroom structures or instruction necessary (Nieto, 1992) to meet the particular and often language-based needs of Mexican-American students. Two interrelated meaning schemes indicated the psychological meaning perspective of colorblind nonaccommodative denial—colorblindness and no accommodation. While colorblindness will be described, the second meaning scheme, no accommodation, will be focused on in greater detail.
Findings on Colorblindness

Three patterns in teachers’ discourse indicated the meaning scheme of colorblindness. The first is best described by the following phrase: “I don’t see color, I see students.” According to multiple teachers’ discourse in this case study, the majority of teachers at Valverde did not pay attention to such differences (of race) “until someone points them out.” Similar comments further indicated that this shared perception could extend to culture as well as color differences. The effort to deny that Mexican-American students brought cultural differences to the school was evident in teachers’ discourse, such as this statement made by one of the veterans on staff:

I have done more reading on issues relating to Mexican-American students ... I have made an increased effort to be more sensitive to students’ needs, but again, this is not a Mexican-American issue for me. It is a student issue.

(male Math teacher)

With an emphasis placed on the individual, teachers were able to side-step the experiences, oppression, and disparities felt by those who were assigned membership within a devalued racial/social group (Kubota, 2004).

Second, notions of respect and equality were suggested in the discourse of other teachers. According to some participants, an environment of respect between teacher and student is the key to successful practice with student populations such as those at Valverde. One teacher describes her focus in this way:

I myself emphasize respect in my class everyday and try my best that students respect each other. I respect them, they respect me. They are students to me not Hispanic, Mexican American, White, Black or other. I do not care about the color of their skin, I respect them and they respect me, that is what is important.

(female English teacher)

For her, neither color nor culture were important, only this environment of respect. Statements such as “I do not care about the color of their skin,” were commonplace in teacher discourse and illustrated
the teachers’ desire to remain “colorblind” to students’ racial and cultural differences.

Finally, the avoidance of engaged, racial discourse in the classroom was the third factor within the meaning scheme of colorblindness. According to one educator, the expectation that teachers should be called upon to acknowledge the cultural heritage (as suggested in those professional development efforts that address awareness-raising among teachers, especially awareness-raising concerning ethnic-blindness and cultural-blindness) is “counter-productive.” Three-quarters of the teachers at Valverde considered this to be true especially if the student’s heritage is perceived as oppressed. They felt that bringing up such topics would breed an “environment of competition among peoples.” Hegemony and sameness were seen as of greatest importance to the teachers as evidenced in the following statement:

I know that our school is composed of a majority of Mexican American students but I feel that as educators we need to work with all students. I know that we also have to take culture into consideration, but most importantly we also need to remember that we are Americans. And I feel that we are Americans first.

(female Art teacher)

According to this discourse of assimilation, education is not an opportunity for diverse peoples to exchange ideas and knowledge through honest critical dialogs; rather, it is the avenue for assimilating CLD students without acknowledging or supporting their cultural differences. Even though the majority of their students were Mexican American, teachers were able to justify their colorblind perspectives on the basis of equality and with a focus on hegemony. By choosing to ignore their Mexican-American students’ diverse experiences, these teachers were then able to avoid dealing with difference altogether.

The meaning scheme of colorblindness functions in tandem with the second meaning scheme of no accommodation. When teachers elect to take the stance of colorblindness, their desire and ability to effectively accommodate for the unique needs of Mexican-American students is questionable. From this perspective, they are unable to see the gravity or magnitude of the need for differentiated instruction that accommodates students’ varying diversity.
Findings on Nonaccommodation

Study data supports the argument that teachers’ colorblind standpoint and lack of accommodation for their students’ diverse linguistic, sociocultural, cognitive, and academic needs has negative implications for students’ learning and English-language development. The meaning scheme of no accommodation provides further evidence for the identification of a psychological meaning perspective of colorblind nonaccommodative denial shared among the teacher participants in this study.

It should be noted that the term accommodation here denotes the concept of culture-specific accommodation as detailed by Nieto (1992). In brief, culture-specific accommodation would require educators to acknowledge that racial and linguistic differences do matter. This type of accommodation refers to the capacity of schools and teachers to identify and understand schools as socially constructed entities that perpetuate the cultural norms of the majority. This understanding guides reflective practitioners in their efforts to utilize the resources and funds of knowledge that students bring to school (in conjunction with their own biography and socialization). In doing so, educators maximize the students’ potential for academic success.

The section to follow will elaborate upon the scheme of no accommodation as evidenced in participant discourse. Many reasons were given for teachers’ lack of accommodation. The major themes that surfaced were (a) time, (b) students’ low socioeconomic status, and (c) teachers’ perception of risk.

Lack of Time as a Rationale for Denial of the Need to Accommodate

Lack of time was a recurrent theme in teachers’ discourse that rationalized a denial of accommodation in classroom structure and curriculum to meet the particular needs of Mexican-American students. The following remarks taken from teachers’ discourse were typical:

I believe that once we sit back and ponder we will realize that we “can” have a positive effect on the students and culture of Valverde ... My biggest obstacle in rethinking and restructuring my teaching
is time. Planning lessons to meet the needs of Mexican American students does take time and effort.

(female English teacher)

As this excerpt illustrates, the participants often realized the benefits of personal reflection with respect to structural and curricular accommodations necessary to meet the needs of Mexican-American students. Some further acknowledged that such accommodations could have a positive influence on outcomes for these students. Nevertheless, despite these realizations, the lack of time was a recurrent rationale for why such accommodation was not undertaken by teachers within the school. Teachers frequently asserted that time was a restricting factor in their ability to accommodate the needs of Mexican-American students.

**Socioeconomic Status of the Student Used against Race-Based Accommodation**

The perceived socioeconomic status of certain Mexican-American students at Valverde also appeared to influence teachers’ denial of the need to accommodate the students’ learning. Periodic discussions among participants during reflection sessions surrounded issues of appropriate classroom structures and curriculum for the student population at Valverde. Classroom structures discussed by the researcher as examples meant to prompt group discussion were: (a) the pros and cons of differentiated seating arrangements; (b) the dynamics of project stations as a way to facilitate experiential learning units; and (c) the question of whether order or variety ought to be the benchmark of the classroom routine. Curricular options discussed by the researcher as examples meant to prompt group discussion were: (a) the question of whether certain English as a second language (ESL) strategies of instruction could be purposively modified for use with any learner having reading difficulties; and (b) the issues of whether struggling junior high school students are ever really challenged by a strict use of basal readers for remediation.

Discourse shared among participants during such sessions indicated a commonly held perception that structural and curricular accommodations specific to Mexican-American students would prove futile since low socioeconomic status, not socialization or linguistic
influences, were responsible for their personal and academic problems with the school environment. For example:

As we look at the culture of our students who are predominately Mexican American, I tend to think that some of the problems are not so much due to culture as much due to low socioeconomic status ... It doesn't matter if they are brown, black, white or whatever, if their economic level is low, the problems would be the same.

(female English teacher)

This teacher's remarks indicated a denial of any color-based, language-based, or culture-based differences in the problems and challenges faced by students at Valverde. The socioeconomic rationale for no accommodation mentioned is one that another teacher struggled to resolve in her mind:

This [study] has forced me to seriously evaluate my prejudices and to contemplate exactly where those prejudices are directed. I have been determining that, in many ways, prejudices do affect my behavior ... I am forced to accept that a certain socioeconomic group has a lot of negative feelings [i.e., prejudice] directed against it.

(female Social Studies teacher)

This comment taken from a teacher's journal was reflective of how many teachers in this study were just beginning to acknowledge that race or linguistic difference impacted their teaching. This lack of knowledge, which surfaced in the majority of participants' discourse, highlights another deeper issue at hand-fear-and how it relates to some teachers' assumptions about risk-taking and classroom management at Valverde.

Avoidance of Risk-taking as Rationale for Nonaccommodation

Perceived risk-taking was a third significant theme tied to the meaning scheme of no accommodation shared among participants in the study. More specifically, teachers recurrently argued that to accommodate particular needs of Mexican-American students was to risk loss of classroom control. These arguments were to some degree a rationale for teachers' denial of accommodation for students at Valverde.
Participants’ discourse placed the primary emphases of education at Valverde on students’ strict adherence to rules, a safe environment for students and teachers, students who were on task, and teachers’ constant control of both students and classroom environments. Control was a specific emphasis for these teachers, because simply having rules did not necessarily encompass their idea of control. Rather, their idea of control was based on the degree to which their classroom and school environments (as well as those of their fellow teachers) reflected a sense of order.

The following comment from a participant reflected teachers’ emphasis on strict adherence to rules as an educational goal worthy of attention:

Are we [schools, educators] supposed to bend the rules to accommodate each and every student? Each student has his problem. Every student needs the rules bent for him or her. I just can’t see this! No one bent the rules for me ... Eventually, we all have to follow the rules if we plan to succeed in this society. Eve [one of the course instructors I had to learn to follow rules. She tells me that a teacher bent the rules for her because she was a migrant student. I understand and I am happy that someone helped her out. But the bottom line is that she eventually had to follow the rules set by our society or she wouldn’t be the success she is now. Am I being close-minded?

(male Math teacher)

This comment taken from a teacher’s reflective journal indicated that the emphasis on rules and authority at Valverde was less focused on Mexican-American students’ understanding of the rules and more on whether those students followed those rules to the letter (“the bottom line is that she eventually had to follow the rules”). According to this interpretation, any problems a student might have are less important than the student’s need to conform to imposed rules. Participant observation of reflection group discussions and interchanges overall seemed to confirm this mentality.

Other educational emphases at Valverde indicated by teachers’ discourse were maintaining a safe environment and keeping students on task. Teachers saw these as the keys to positive student outcomes. For most of these teachers, their discourse in reflection group sessions indicated that they were less concerned with the safety of the
environment from the students’ point of view than they were with the safety of that environment from their own perspective. It is arguable that, as seen previously in similar studies in the field, this need for safety was based on some underlying issues of fear and lack of understanding regarding the Mexican-American youth at Valverde (Larsen & Ovando, 2001).

According to the discourse of one participant, it is the teacher’s job, first and foremost, to get students on task, which was often a point of frustration for teachers at Valverde. The teachers’ emphasis on keeping students on task correlated directly to their overall apparent need for control and establishing a safe, non-threatening environment for the teachers. For many of these educators, a sense of control (to minimize risk) was best reflected in a classroom and school environment indicative of order. In one teacher’s reflective journal, she asserted that the maintenance of order in the classroom was essential to a teacher’s employment at Valverde, further indicating that these emphases were the product of administrative mandates, not just teachers’ shared interpretations of appropriate educational environments for their students.

Analysis of the data indicated recurrent outcomes of the dichotomy between teachers’ educational emphases at Valverde (students’ strict adherence to rules, safety, time on task, control) and the needs of their Mexican-American students. Frustration and perpetual negativity among school faculty were two recurrent themes resulting from teachers’ lack of flexibility in structural and curricular changes and their unwillingness to risk loss of control. The teachers shared a strong sense of negativity, and their colorblind meaning scheme, which implies the meaning scheme of no accommodation seemed to hinder their critical reflection on the relationship between their educational emphases of control and order and the students’ academic performance. Teachers’ high levels of frustration with student performance were evident in their discourse from the second and third reflection focus-group meetings and were unmistakable in the following comment:

I hate grading their writing assignments. These [Mexican-American] students cannot write one complete sentence! I get angry, frustrated, and depressed when I grade writing assignments. The most frustrating thing is that students refuse to think! (female English teacher).
This growing frustration necessarily influenced an increasing sense of negativity that became shared among Valverde teachers and was reinforced on a daily basis, from discussions in the hallways, to conversations in the teachers’ lounge, to interactions among teachers outside the school itself. Over time, this shared and mutually reinforced negativity became, as it were, self-perpetuating.

Other comments from teachers substantiated this theme of perpetual negativity among school faculty. Nonetheless, while aware of the damaging effects of this negativity, one teacher shared in the following written statement his tentativeness and unwillingness to confront the dynamic:

If you [other teachers at Valverde] are this negative toward these kids what in the world are you doing here? Do you think these kids don’t pick up on your thoughts and feelings? If you don’t like/respect these guys, you’re certainly not going to get this in return-No wonder you’re not happy! (I’d love to relate this to others! Wouldn’t dare—but I just don’t understand some people!)

(male Physical Education teacher)

Despite the often profoundly negative outcomes of the teachers’ skewed educational emphases with their Mexican-American students, their discourse indicated that many were persuaded that accommodating the particular needs of Mexican-American students was not worth the potential risk.

Among the themes found within the schemes of colorblindness and no accommodation, there was one consistent theme worth noting that was evident in both, and that was denial. Many teachers in this case study denied the existence of racial and linguistic difference among their students and the resulting need for accommodation based on their perceived duty to treat all students as individuals. As mentioned previously, this notion of individualism denies the fact that these students are not only a product of socialization in the Mexican-American culture but also the product of the socially constructed identity placed on them in the U.S. school system, and specifically at Valverde. One participant noted:

Knowing that my classes don’t always go the way I want them to [is] because [of] the dynamics of the [Mexican-American] student
population rather than because I am a poor teacher makes me realize that I need to give up ...

(female English teacher)

This remark taken from a teacher’s reflective journal suggested that it is the “dynamics of the student population;” not teachers’ lack of accommodation or school climate that was at the heart of any problems these students may experience at Valverde. The teachers continued to deny that there existed a direct connection between their beliefs and actions and CLD students’ success.

Discussion

This ethnographic case study of teachers’ meaning perspectives regarding their day-to-day interactions with Mexican-American junior high students at Valverde resulted in the identification of the two interrelated meaning schemes-colorblindness and no accommodation. Grounded in Mezirow’s theoretical framework, the psychological meaning perspective of colorblind nonaccommodative denial indicated that teachers denied the need for accommodation of classroom structure or curriculum to meet the particular needs of their Mexican-American students. Implications for this psychological meaning perspective are evident in all levels of the education endeavor.

Impact on Students

Given the exponential growth of the CLD population in U.S. schools, teachers can no longer stand behind the statement “I don’t see color, I treat all my students the same” and then expect the limited number of ESL teachers employed within their schools to deal with those children whose differences cannot be dismissed. Race is central to the way one interprets his or her identity and reality as well as the identity and reality of others (Mezirow, 1991). If educators are looking toward the future and striving to truly educate CLD students effectively, they must begin to explore the role that race and teachers’ meaning perspectives toward the Other have on identity formation and professional practice in schools.
Teachers’ lack of effective cultural competence training regarding CLD students continues to have negative repercussions, often translating into fear, misunderstandings, low expectations, institutional deafness, and labeling. Subsequently, these elements lead to the students’ loss of voice and cultural identity, alienation, marginalization, and ultimately a self-fulfilling prophecy (Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003; Hobson-Horton & Owens, 2004; Johnson, 2002; Kubota, 2004; Larson & Ovando, 2001; McLaren & Torres, 1999; Ovando & McLaren, 2000; Palmer, 2003). For ELL students, these practitioner deficits are compounded when teachers also lack training in methods specific to second language acquisition.

**Implications for Teachers**

This study explored a framework for understanding how teachers’ feelings, assumptions, and misconceptions regarding Mexican-American students translate into action and non-action. It also affirms and expounds on previous research that establishes how critical the constant consideration of race and other aspects of diversity in policy, discourse, and practice are for true equitable education of CLD students (Gay, 1993; Nieto, 1995).

Teachers’ acknowledgment of cultural and linguistic difference is an important first step in letting go of the colorblind perspective. This, in turn, opens the door for consideration of difference and can result in a willingness to effectively accommodate for those differences. For Nieto (1992), it is the culturally different student who, for too long, has done the accommodating in public school education. This study supports a culturally empathetic and reality-based alternative. As recommended by Nieto, we must take the perspective of mutual accommodation, a perspective in which neither the student nor the teacher expects complete accommodation. The mutual-accommodation argument suggests that culturally competent teachers and CLD students together may best determine the most appropriate strategies and structures compatible with the disposition of each.

As the data in this study would suggest, many of the assumptions and biases that teachers hold regarding Mexican-American students stem from misconceptions. Teachers’ fears and anxieties were evident in their emphases on control and maintaining order at all cost. Anxiety connected to what they perceive as a “lack of order” can be mitigated
with an understanding of the assumptions and beliefs that drive human interaction within any socially constructed system.

For example, if teachers gain an understanding of the social and historical context of their own identity development alongside the unique biographies of their Mexican-American students, they would be more likely to consider the potential dynamics of their diverse classrooms and effectively accommodate for them. Previous research indicates that this accommodation in turn would have direct, positive consequences for classroom management and student success (Collier & Thomas, 1988, 1989; Garcia, 1995; Gay, 2000; Herrera & Murry, 2005). By creating classroom environments that are low-fear, nurturing, scaffolded, and dynamic, the frustration and perpetual negativity exhibited in the teachers’ discourse at Valverde toward Mexican-American students would be alleviated.

Education reform of this kind is only possible when there are opportunities for teachers to critically reflect on their own meaning perspectives. Without critical reflection and ongoing consideration of issues such as oppression, institutional racism, White privilege, and ethnic and linguistic discrimination, teachers seldom prove able to surface and test the culture-bound assumptions (shaped by their experiential and academic backgrounds) embedded in their perspectives. Such assumptions become the unspoken rules by which teachers interpret and act within the realm of teaching in a difference-blind institution (Gay, 1993; Herrera, 2005; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Nieto, 1995).

When the teachers and students experience a linguistic and cultural disconnect, the learning environment can become hostile. Critical reflection can provide educators the opportunity to examine the reasons for this disconnect and bring about a shift in teacher meaning perspectives. Through prolonged, in-depth critical reflection, educators may begin to realize that everyone has meaning perspectives (which need evaluating regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, or gender), and that these perspectives are innately tied to our socialization (Mezirow, 1990, 1991).

**Systemic Change in Educating CLD Students-Specifically ELLs**

Difference-blindness dissolves the lived experiences and complex realities of CLD groups into an illusion of sameness. When individuals subscribe to this social construct they are engaging in a social and
political act that Frankenberg (1993) calls “power evasion.” This power evasion position disregards the innate benefits associated with White privilege by claiming that, “we are all the same under the skin” (p. 14). It is suggested that this difference-blind perspective places the responsibility on those people of color to move toward sameness (hegemony) and any failure to do so is their fault (Kubota, 2004).

Because educational institutions are historically a product of socially and culturally privileged individuals and are designed to impart education to the majority population, it is crucial to examine those aspects of schools that are inherently racist and veiled to marginalized groups. The unspoken rules, hidden agendas, ignorance, and coercive relationships of power and privilege that hinder CLD students’ access and opportunity are based on long-standing institutionally embedded assumptions/biases. In general, legislators, administrators, and educators make decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, assessment, programming, and student placements every day based on their own meaning perspectives and on the established system, often with little consideration of CLD students’ biographies. For this reason, reflective teachers must explore the dynamics of their classroom and their school to determine whether the environments are additive or subtractive for CLD students: Are they conducive for second language development? Do they validate CLD students as legitimate members of the community?

Educators and administrators must develop structures or networks within the school that not only increase access but also support, value, and utilize the experiential and linguistic funds of knowledge that diverse students bring with them if their potential is to be realized. When teachers are given genuine opportunities to critically reflect on their meaning perspectives and apply their new understandings in practice, they can begin to acknowledge the social construct of race by seeing difference and all that it implies for CLD students in schools.

As evidenced in this study and the reviewed literature, many of our U.S. educational institutions promote a perspective of difference-blindness. Colleges, universities, and schools commonly overlook the existence of the meaning perspectives that teachers bring with them into their classrooms, where they shape every interaction. In fact, these meaning perspectives are often further reinforced in the professional development that both pre-service and in-service teachers receive. As a result of this reinforcement, teachers’ skewed and
unchallenged perspectives translate into neglect of their students’ language and academic needs.

As supporters of critical multiculturalism would assert, effectively teaching a critical consciousness that moves people to impact social change requires the confrontation of racism directly. Critical multiculturalism focuses on deconstructing hegemonic worldviews and engages all learners in the examination of the social, political, and economic implications for race in the development of power and privilege (Kubota, 2004). We must all become concerned with addressing the deeply embedded meaning perspectives and the resulting meaning schemes that are present in teachers’ lived experiences. We must understand the role that examining our own socialization has in the act of teaching, and most importantly, the implications it has for the academic success of CLD students.

Discussion Questions

1. The authors discuss colorblind views held by junior high school teachers in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Think about your experience of encountering statements or social practices that reflect colorblindness. What was the context? Who was involved? What were their racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds? What effects did colorblindness have on students, parents, curriculum, instruction, or overall school structure?

2. In schools where CLD students are the majority, what kind of expectations do teachers have for these students and their parents? What types of teacher dispositions or educational practices would motivate CLD students to achieve academic excellence? What would help them prepare for their advanced education or future career?

3. The authors advocate mutual accommodation in schools. What are concrete examples of such accommodation? What can teachers do?

4. The authors state that systemic professional development that fosters critical reflection for pre-service and in-service educators is necessary to transform the cultural climate of public schools. Knowing that schools and communities have limited resources, what can change agents within public schools do to impact change (at the classroom, building, and district level)? What about at the program level in colleges of education?
Notes

1. Etic coding: an analysis tool for approaching the data based upon identified concepts or themes defined and outlined within the chosen theoretical framework for a study.
2. Ernie codes: those patterns in participant voice or actions within the context of a study from which themes are derived.

References


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