Focus on their Promise: How Mexican American Teachers Address Challenging Classrooms

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Abstract
This study examined the culturally responsive teaching practices of two third generation Mexican American teachers from the South Texas borderlands region. The study presents the contextualized teaching practices that inform institutions of higher education prepare pre-service teachers entering the diverse classrooms in America. The implications of this study are to expand and substantiate how contextual teaching practices can help present and future teachers develop human agency that maximizes cultural wealth to positively impact the academic success of high needs students. Central to this study is the generational and cultural variance that exists among Mexican American teachers in terms of their cultural awareness and teaching practices. In fact, the review of the literature revealed that institutions of higher education need to understand that teachers of color will not naturally assume culturally relevant practices in their classroom because they were not raised in a culturally diverse household but in an acculturated home.

Keywords: culturally responsive teaching, leadership, English language learners, accountability, Mexican American teachers, immigrant, third generation

INTRODUCTION
The most important intrinsic factor that contributes to the academic success of Mexican-American immigrant students is their self-motivation to change their academic future. One of the subgroups that comprises 64% of the total immigrant population is the Mexican American (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009, Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010). It has been documented by Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995, 2001) that immigrant students have utilized their high levels of motivation and family security to achieve academic success. Yet, according to Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2009), Mexican immigrants are the most segregated ethnic group within the educational system. The strongest factor in these students’ lives compared to their non-immigrant classmates is their strong family structure that provides secure foundations together with strong work orientation which fosters a sense of personal and social responsibility (Crosnoe, 2005).

As a consequence of a large numbers of Latinos arriving from dozens of countries since the 1950’s, American classrooms are rapidly becoming extraordinarily diverse (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). “Of the 12 million undocumented immigrants estimated to be in the United States today, about 13 percent are children under age eighteen who have been raised in and acculturated to American contexts” (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010, p. 62). “The ethnic and national diversity of contemporary immigrants pales by comparison to the diversity of their class origins. The most educated, and the least educated group in the United States is the immigrants” (Rumbaut, 2008, p. 198). Generally speaking the first generation immigrant’s children achieve a greater degree of education and economic status when compared to non-immigrant, second and third generation Mexican American students. According to Padilla and Gonzalez (2001) findings, more acculturated third generation students performed below academic expectations in comparison to recent immigrants. Similarly, a research study conducted by (Nielsen & Fernandez, 1981) indicated that immigrants performed better than the third and later generation students.

“Presently, more than seven million people are third-plus generation Mexican Americans, yet the complexities of their borderland identities and experiences are rarely addressed” (Vasquez, 2010, p. 46). Central to this study is the generational and cultural variance that exists among Mexican American teachers in terms of their cultural awareness and teaching practices.

The question remains if the Mexican American students’ academic success can be attributed or undermined by the educational system designed to help them and what can institutions of higher education preparing future teachers learn from the contextualized voices of third generation Mexican Americans teachers?
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
The research paradigm for this research study was critical race theory. Bell’s major themes are racism, school desegregation, and the 14th amendment that extends constitutional protection to all citizens (1989, 1992, 2004). The critical race theory tenets of race and class were used to analyze the contextualized narratives of the two third generation Mexican American teachers working with first, second, and third generation Mexican American students who informed this research study.

Ladson-Billings (1998), who is credited for bringing Bell’s (1992) critical race theory five tenets into education, postulated the foundational knowledge for investigating how the critical race theory tenets are applied to public school norms in curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding and desegregation. Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (1998) provided historical, legal, and fundamental support to the argument that the conceptions of race, in the postmodern/postcolonial world, are more embedded and fixed than before. These normative categories are similar to the middle class, Eurocentric cultural norms described by (Gay, 2010).

CRT scholars subscribe to the following set of interests: understand how a “regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America” and to change the bond that exists between law and racial power (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 12). Delgado (1989) argued that the dominant group justifies its power with stories and stock explanations that construct reality in ways that maintain their privilege (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The contextualized narratives of the two participants in this study captured the variance that exists within the lived experiences of third generation Mexican American teachers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: FOCUSING ON THE PROMISE NOT THE PROBLEM
“In the coming two decades, as the U.S. native-parentage labor force continues to shrink, immigrants and their children are expected to account for most of the nation’s labor force, with the fastest-growing occupations requiring college degrees” (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010, p. 43). There seems to be a growing interest in understanding the teachers’ perspectives, especially as they relate to education of English language learners and how to increase their academic achievement (Bustos Flores, Riojas Clark, Claeys, & Villarreal, 2007; Phillips & Nava, 2011). The solution to the growing academic needs for the children of immigrants, whether they are first, second, or third generation Mexican Americans is in the teachers in the classrooms. “Education is increasingly important to the success of both individuals and nations, and growing evidence demonstrates that among all educational resources, teachers’ abilities are especially crucial contributors to the students’ learning” (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 300). Their teachers need to understand the impact that their culturally relevant practices will have in the future of the United States of America’s economy and politics (Gay, 2010; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Haberman, 1995)

A great degree of variance exists in the teachers’ perspectives including teachers of color about how to effectively work with English language learners (Bae, Holloway, Li, & Bempechat, 2008). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2013) and their publication entitled The Condition of Education 2013, the percentage of public school students who were English language learners increased from 9% in 2002-2003 to 10% in 2010-2011. NCES, 2013 study also suggests that the achievement gaps in the subject of reading between fourth grade students who were ELL and Non-ELL students has also widened. “In 2011, the achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students in the NAEP reading assessment were 36 points at the 4th-grade level and 44 points at the 8th-grade level” (NCES, 2013, p. 54). The current events regarding the growing young Mexican immigrant population is what continues to drive the search for long-term solutions that address the social and educational needs of these first generation, second, or third generation Mexican American students regardless of their legal status in the United States (Cervantes & Hernandez, 2011; Phillips & Nava, 2011).

The second generation Mexican American students together with the third generation and beyond are equally affected with the consequences of the continuous immigration. The new second generation is rapidly growing diversifying through continued immigration, natural increase and intermarriage, complicating its contours and making it increasingly important, for theoretical as well as programmatic and public policy reasons (Rumbaut, 2004, p. 1161). Educators, who acknowledge the cultural identities and heritage of their students, and understand their cultural legacies and how those impact their dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning, are needed in present day classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Yoon, 2008). However, a dilemma exists when teachers of color have been acculturated to the American culture and have only been exposed to normalized ways of teaching (Delgado Bernal Aleman, & Garavito, 2009). “Cultural identity is viewed as a lifespan process evolving and changing as the individual moves through the various psychological stages of development” (Cuellar & Gonzalez, 2000, p. 605). The question remains if the Mexican American students’ academic success can be attributed or undermined by the educational system designed to help them and what can
institutions of higher education preparing future teachers learn from the contextualized voices of third generation Mexican Americans teachers?!

METHODS
The study focused on (a) data collection through semi-structured interviews, (b) participant observation of the field setting, and (c) analytic reflection on the data gathered from the interviews and observations. All six participants were recruited via face-to-face conversations, contact letters, and e-mails that were send out to teachers from two borderlands school districts. For the purpose of this journal article, the author will be focusing on two of the participants only. The participants were recruited based on the criteria that they were third generation Mexican American teachers. A crucial determining factor in securing their participation was to find out if they were truly third generation Mexican Americans. The researcher used Buriel and Cardoza’s (1993) definition of the major characteristics of a third generation Mexican American. The semi-structured interviews were scheduled by date and time depending on the participants’ schedule and availability. The interviews were done in a journal and simple note taking was also used. The researcher focused on the following data collection strategies: (a) written reflections, (b) in-depth one-to-one interview to capture the teachers’ background, and generational status, education, and language so as to capture the participants’ perspectives and tacit knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some of the semi-structured questions allowed for the participants to further expand on their experiential knowledge based on their years of teaching experience and lived experiences (McCraeken, 1988; Mishler, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988).

The author observed the participants during one 30-minute instructional lesson. The intent of the classroom observations was to collect data regarding the participants’ classroom interactions with their students. The classroom’s power dynamics were studied as per the Miller (2000) and Norton (2000) studies that suggested that learning may change as a function of the interrelationships due to social power dynamics. It is important to note that the participants’ selected their lesson. The classroom observations were done to capture the participants’ teaching practices and expand on the essence of the participants’ actual interactions with their students and the correlation(s) that existed in relation to their individual stories.

FINDINGS: CULTURAL AWARENESS AND CONTEXTUALIZED TEACHING PRACTICES
Mexican American educators can consciously or subconsciously practice normalizing ways of educating their students using deficit teaching practices (Bustos Flores, 2001; Contreras & Valverde, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999). Bartolomé, (2004) concluded that social class differences between teachers and students can impact the students’ achievement positively or negatively depending on the level of connections that are made between teachers and students.

Furthermore, it is important to note that in relation to the research findings of (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011), teacher preparation programs cannot assume that teachers of color will naturally practice culturally relevant practices (pg.5). Culturally relevant practices need to be discussed, and practiced by novice teachers of color depending on their generational status and lived experiences.

Pedagogically speaking, teachers cannot separate themselves from their own beliefs as they are social beings who have different beliefs according to their sociocultural contexts (Monzó & Rueda, 2001). In the best possible classroom scenario Mexican American teachers teaching Mexican American students will use culturally appropriate interactional styles that scaffold and validate students’ instruction. Rist (1970) postulated that the social reality created in the classroom often has lifelong outcomes, especially for students. In addition, Ball (2000) suggested that teachers often adapt cultural nuances that are reflective of the majority group experiences. Therefore, precautions have to be taken and no one should assume that because teachers and students share common linguistic and/or cultural experiences, that the bilingual teachers’ will assist and recognize the needs of English language learners (Bustos Flores, 2001).

Consequently it is important to note that all six participants in this study were third generation Mexican Americans, they demonstrated culturally relevant teaching practices that were informed by their contextualized experiences with racism or classism. In addition, for the purpose of this article the author will focus on two of the six participants. First, Esperanza, a pseudo name, is a kinder teacher who has been teaching for 11 years. Esperanza is a third generation Mexican American teacher whose parents and grandparents were born in Mission, Texas, and La Joya, Texas, respectively. She comes from a family tradition of educators. The other participant is Melissa, during the time of this study she was a Block III student teacher. The author

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1 Third generation: Born in the United States or its territories with both parents also being U.S. citizens. The third generation individuals can be third generation based on the mother’s or father’s side. They are not fluent in Spanish and prefer to speak English and have minimal, if any, ties to some of the Mexican traditions. (Buriel & Cardoza, 1993).
interviewed her in order to capture the perceptions and perspectives of a novice teacher, who was still attending classes.

Through her personal teaching style, Esperanza has been able to convey the meaning of culture and ethnic pride. Esperanza acknowledges that although her students and her might share the same culture, “with age you see your culture different.” Esperanza explained what she meant by stating that with time she has built resistance and pride in her culture because she will not let anyone mistreat her, and she tries to instill that pride in her students as well. She also added that in her classroom she has students from different generations ranging from immigrants to third generation like her but that her life has been different from her current third generation Mexican American students. She remembered an event that happened to her family in 1978:

I remember in 1978, racial discrimination existed because my parents related this story to us. As migrant workers in Dimmit, Texas, my parents entered a coffee house at 5 a.m. in the morning. I was 17 years old. My parents entered, and we waited in the truck. My parents sat at the counter waiting to be served, and they were never served. The waitress waited on other patrons, and ignored my parents.

That experience was crucial for her development as a culturally responsive teacher as she explained in the following manner. Through her personal teaching style, she has been able to convey the meaning of culture and ethnic pride. The students do not know their own culture or traditions.” She stated that she had to incorporate conveying the meaning of the lessons she presents with the local culture and experiences to connect the students’ appreciation for their culture and traditions.

In addition, Melissa, also a pseudonym, believes that the primary role of an educator is to “inspire people, impacting people.” “You cannot forget that the kids need to eat, have clothing, in order to learn.” As far as being a Mexican American educator, Melissa believes that it is important to teach the children both languages, English and Spanish proficiently and correctly.

Mexican American children who do not live in the border get bullied for being Mexican, but in the border most of our students are Mexican, so they have other issues like not being respected based on their low social economic status.

Melissa adds that she works with fifth grade students who are perceived as lazy or not caring by other teachers. She has established personal relationships with them. Melissa believes that by integrating children and helping them make friends, they can be accepted.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The cultural challenges that the present day educators are facing today are varied and diverse. For example, Mexican American teachers can be first, second, or third generation and their students can be first generation immigrants, second generation, or third generation as well. However, although the students and their teachers might share the same race and ethnicity, they could possibly be worlds apart due to their social economic status, conscious or unconscious reality, and prejudices, therefore, perpetuating the value conflicts between students and teachers.

This research study documented the perceptions of six third generation Mexican American teachers working with first, second, and third generation Mexican American students. However, only two of those participants’ narratives are being presented in this journal article. Moreover this study was conducted with the purpose of making an implication about the degree of variance that exists within Mexican American teachers based on their generational status. Accordingly, the researcher’s goal is for teachers of color and multigenerational background to begin to challenge “the normalized ways of thinking about language, race, gender, and class” (Delgado Bernal Aleman, & Garavito, 2009, p. 566) that have been prevalent in our nation. Under these circumstances Mexican American teachers could be perpetuating culturally insensitive teaching practices without knowledge of how they are victimizing future generations of Mexican American students and ignoring the students’ funds of knowledge. Due to their lived experiences the two participants which were the focus of this journal article revealed how their lived experiences have influenced their teaching in a positive manner.

Therefore, educational leaders must ensure that teacher preparation programs change with the times and analyze the variance that exists in current teachers’ perceptions of theoretical applications and daily classroom practice. The Mexican American population continues to grow in numbers, especially in the Southwest region of the United States. Hispanic serving institutions need to better understand and better serve the diverse needs of college level Hispanic students. For the purpose of creating educational polices that address the educational needs of all the Mexican American students, having the knowledge about the variance within the present and future Mexican American teachers will guide future policymakers, administrators to make more meaningful decisions affecting future generations of Mexican American students.
LIMITATION OF THE STUDY
The limitation of this study is that it was conducted at a micro scale. The author has plans to expand the study to other Texas communities with a larger number of third generation Mexican American teachers. Ultimately, the author hopes to contribute to the academic success of present and future Mexican American students.

REFERENCES


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