

## **The Voices of Seven Doctoral Students: Journeys Toward Becoming Multicultural Teacher Educators**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**This qualitative study provides the narratives of seven doctoral students who reflected upon their journeys of becoming multicultural educators. The categorical-content analysis of the seven personal narratives revealed five themes about their journey: identity and social positioning of authors, identify and social position of the authors' students, philosophical and theoretical frameworks, remaining passive or taking a stand and career goals and aspirations.**

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### **The Voices of Seven Doctoral Students: Journeys toward Becoming Multicultural Teacher Educators**

Effectively working with culturally, linguistically, ethnically, economically diverse (CLEED) students is a great challenge in education today. Educating teachers for this challenge is one to the responsibilities of teacher education programs. National student demographics include 57% European American and 43% students of color, while teacher demographics include 83 % European Americans, 17% teachers of color which includes African Americans 7%, Hispanics 7%, Asians, 1% and Native Americans, .5% (Hausarr & Bailey, 2009). Consequently, teachers and students backgrounds differ, creating a lack of cultural understanding of many educators, which can affect instruction, interactions and the learning process. This article examines a recruitment and retention program, which focuses on increasing the number of doctoral students. The program goals were to: a) develop scholars who would have a comprehensive understanding multicultural education; b) increase the number of multicultural education professorates who can effectively train generations of teachers; and c) increase the number of faculty of color with emphasis in multicultural education.

In this article, seven doctoral students share stories of their ongoing professional and personal development as multicultural educators. Authors recognize multicultural education not only as a philosophy and reform movement, but also as a process (Banks, 2005; Grant, 2004). They noted that combining knowledge with reflection, critical analysis, and praxis is a tenet of multicultural education (Jordan-Irvine & York, 2004). The stories represent the authors' efforts to examine where they have been, how this shaped them, where they currently stand, and how they envision utilizing their growing expertise. Becoming multicultural educators is a continuous journey. In relating our stories, we hope to communicate lessons learned along the way and offer encouragement to others. Thus, the purpose of this article is to (a) provide a context for the study and (b) share the voices of the seven doctoral students and an interpretation of their narratives.

#### **Study Context**

The participants of this study include seven doctoral students in a curriculum and instruction department at a Research I university in the southwestern United States. One of the authors serves as the committee chair for these seven students. A recruitment and retention (R&R) program was developed in the fall of 1999 to increase the university's number of multicultural education scholars and faculty of color with degrees in this specialization. Professors developed the R&R model based on "four P's" ---policies, personnel, programs and practices.

Policy statements within strategic plans at all three levels (university, college and department) of the institution address the need for recruitment and retention of multicultural education scholars, particularly students of color. The R&R model provides personnel including faculty of color and others who offer emotional and academic support to the program's students. The dean of the college also provides financial support ranging from \$1000 to \$3000 for fifteen students, and assistantships are offered to full-

time R&R students from the department head. Student support practices include team mentoring and advising to encourage dialogue between R&R faculty team and students.

Professors assist students in identifying their responsibilities and course sequence selection and in developing research interests and skills for the dissertation process. Many students commute, some as much as seven hours from campus. Most students in the R&R program are members of one of three cohorts; Alpine (24 students), Rodeo (4 students) and Cress Cup (8 students). The three professors who developed the R&R model teach on campus as well as off-site courses via TTVN, e-learning, and sites throughout the state.

### **Methodology**

Narratives analysis has become increasingly popular among educational researchers because it contextualizes and personalizes individual's experiences. Noddings and Witherell (1991) state that narratives "provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems. They banish the indifference often generated by samples, treatments, and faceless subjects" (1991, p. 280). Madeline Grumet believe that "to tell a story is to impose form on experience" (1988, p. 87). Concurrently, Cooper (1991) states that, "as chroniclers of our own stories, we write to create ourselves, to give voice to our experiences, to learn who we are and where we have been" (p. 111). Since Multicultural Education is concerned with increasing awareness of others, it is well suited for narratives as a form of knowledge construction.

For the purposes of this analysis, an emphasis was placed on constructing understandings of speakers' or participants' views of the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Some researchers (e.g. Labov, 1972; Mischler, 1986) focus on the formats individuals use to tell their stories, paying attention to details such as sequencing of events or plot structures. Other scholars (e.g. Clark, 2001; Linde, 1993) emphasize the selection of words used by speakers for clues. In this case, the authors decided that the nature of the narrative material lent itself to analyses that would focus on the content, rather than on the form of the students' stories. We opted to use one of the four methods advocated by a group of Israeli scholars (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1988), the categorical-content analysis.

These methods examine how speakers explain who, what, and why types of questions. Categorical-content method requires individual dissection of narratives into bits of meaning and then a search for patterns across the body of data. This method entails going back and forth between interview or narrative transcriptions, noting speech segments representative of particular meanings, or "categories." Drafts of each narrative, with line numbers embedded, were emailed to each group member in order to delineate possible categories. Examples of narrative passages expressive categories were pulled from the transcriptions (identified by speakers and transcription line numbers) and filed in a quote bank in the form of three-by-five index cards.

## The Voices

The narratives shared below are as diverse in form and content as the seven co-authors who told them. Despite their varying backgrounds, there are common philosophical, theoretical and ethical streams that flow from their experiences and these streams influence their lives. The narratives demonstrate resiliency, awareness of institutional racism, and commitment to social justice. Otto's<sup>1</sup> narrative depicts his experiences as a White male from a ranching background that brings to mind stereotypes of cowboys. The next narratives are of three African American women (Hattie, Samantha, and Addie) whom attended all-Black public schools and in some way juxtaposed those experiences with ones they had at predominantly White institutions. Lovetta and Ellen's stories are intentionally consolidated because they are both (a White woman and an African-born woman) of privileged backgrounds, which is not associated often with women of color. Josefina, the Mexican American woman, reflects the untold history of her people from a perspective that is very different from Texas and in mainstream textbooks.

### Otto's Story: Theory Verified by Experience

*"As a product of four generations of ranching in Southwest Texas, my grandfather taught me the basics of how to live. He taught me to drive, to take care of my horse, fish, swim and look at your back-trail when you are rounding up livestock. A faith in God, patience, making the best of a given situation, and the philosophy of "doing" even if the chosen course may not be the best are rooted in the hit-or-miss economy that is ranching in Southwest Texas. Inherent in this foundational philosophy is an understanding that individuals are responsible for their own actions; yet, one cannot be independent of the action of others. I was taught at an early age the values of hard work, honesty and integrity, respect for elders, and self-responsibility. These values have proven critical in my journey of becoming a multicultural educator.*

*I am a facilitator of knowledge who hopes to create life-long learners, utilizing multicultural education as a foundational philosophy. Years before I began this journey as a classroom teacher, I managed a large integrated agricultural operation. Those 20 years in agriculture enabled me to experience working with a wide variety of youth including a handicapped niece. When the opportunity presented itself to become a classroom teacher, I jumped at the chance, never considering being anything other than a special education teacher. I returned to college after a twenty year absence and earned my MBA degree. I was hired to teach by the local school district and was admitted into an intensive two-year Alternative Education Teaching Program. Before becoming a Behavior Intervention Specialist, I was certified in three areas (Special Education PK-12, English-as-Second Language, and Severe Emotionally Disturbed and Autistic) and began a seven-year career in teaching children diagnosed as emotionally disturbed. It was while serving as a Behavior Intervention Specialist that I became disturbed about what was happening to children in school and I knew that "something" needed to change. It was also during that*

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper aliases were adopted for participants, as well as for individuals referred to in the participants' narratives.

*time that I was recruited into a doctoral program. The doctoral program became the catalyst that helped me understand multicultural issues in the context of change.”*

### **Hattie’s Story: A Serendipitous Life**

*“I am the product of an all-Black public education. My schools, along with the church, were at the center of my community. My teachers were role models who lived in the community and knew it and its inhabitants well. They held high expectations for me they cared for and about me; they knew how I learned; and they knew how to teach me. These influences, and my family and community, empowered me. I knew I could succeed at whatever I chose to do with my life.*

*In 1965, I entered a small college where I encountered the most rigorous program of my academic experience. A historically Black, church affiliated institution, the school’s focus was on the ministry and teacher education. During my final two semesters, as I contemplated internship and career, I was told by the professor who would become my teaching supervisor that: “You are too smart to teach, but if you must, do it at the college level.” How sad it is that even among educators this noble calling is so often discounted. Eventually, I adhered to the advice of my professor, and began post-graduate studies in 1970.*

*At the predominantly White university, I attended three experiences accounted, in large part, for my initial rejection of a teaching career. The first involved my initial interview for acceptance. While praising me for maintaining a 3.7 grade point average while pursuing a double major and working, the chair of the department counseled me against disappointment when I could not replicate this standard at the university. This scenario was not a deterrent as I intended to prove him wrong. The second and third encounters were of a different nature.*

*Serendipity was to become the watchword regarding my post-graduate studies. Having worked in the social service area for five years following the university experience, I was quite established in a career. In January 1975, I entered the university. The Dean, faculty and graduate students shared a collegiality that made student learning a truly challenging adventure. We constituted a community of learners. It was at this institution that I received a vision of the way I wanted my classroom to look and feel, and I was given an opportunity to teach and learn. Disaster struck! Within a year of one another my foster parents died and I assumed the position of head of the household. I was, therefore, only able to complete the Masters’ degree and the coursework toward the doctorate (ABD). This tragedy marked the second detour on my journey toward my current destination.*

*During the 1999-2000 academic year, I moved to Houston, Texas, and sought employment as an English teacher. I completed four interviews in one day and was offered four jobs. Because of my experiences at the detention center (in the state, ninth graders were our largest population), I chose the ninth grade campus’ offer. The principal was forthcoming in explaining that he could find other qualified teachers of English and asked if I would consider teaching reading and supporting the Resource Center staff. My theory*

*that being certified in reading and Special Education would improve my effectiveness in an inclusive classroom had backfired.*

The students in my reading classes were overwhelmingly African and Mexican Americans. I was greeted with students who were mislabeled as learning disabled; and thus, students, in turn, had low self-esteem, disliked school, teachers, and authority, and disdained school learning. I was looking at Paul Willis' (1977) lads. Exacerbating the situation, teachers had very low expectations of these children, and these expectations were manifested in the ways in which they taught and interrelated with the students (Ladson-Billings, 2001). My students and I were subjected to in-school segregation. In spite of the negative aspects of the situation, our state-mandated high stakes test scores increased on average by one or two grades. I made a difference in the lives of my students, but I realized that I could not do what I was doing for another year. At my lowest point, another serendipitous event occurred. Three female African American scholars were recruiting graduate students to participate in an educational cohort at the university. I said, "Yes." The third stop was the charm."

### **Samantha's Story: Other Duties as Assigned.**

*"During my formative years, my Mother established her career as a teacher while my Father worked as a pharmacist and minister. These upwardly mobile, college graduates, expected their six daughters to be successfully independent. We were reared by principles grounded in respect, structure, and protocol. My parents' religious beliefs and my closeness to my father fostered my journey to becoming an educator that has been rooted inextricably in the precepts of integrity, morality, and equity. However, along the way, other lessons were learned.*

*By the time I became a public school student, the idea of collegiality had already taken root. The first elementary school I attended and where Mother taught was predominantly Black. It was there that I met a classmate named Keith who impacted my desire to help students. He walked with a pronounced limp and wore braces on both legs due to poliomyelitis. He was teased just as I was, although for different reasons. It was because of my good grades, that I believed that my third grade teacher allowed me to help Keith. While Keith learned from me, I learned from him. Even though I was thin as a rail, I became his protector. Today, I recognize that performing this role has influenced my efficacy in the classroom.*

*By fourth-grade, I was attending school in an affluent section of the city where Mother then taught. Unaware that she was protecting me, I was excited to be attending a new school. This move was made because of integration. Soon our family moved to the suburbs. Eventually, I attended schools in my neighborhood. The teachers and student body of the high school I was zoned to attend remained predominantly White, but it, too, was changing. When the new high school opened, students of color flocked there to be enrolled. Mother acquiesced to my desire to attend the Black school. From the classroom, to the band hall, to the debate team and the speech and drama class, I flourished under the tutelage of all my Black instructors.*

*By the time I was of college age, the adage of “White is right” reared its ugly head. I was swayed to decline several Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCU) scholarships in favor of one offered by a predominantly White university. I was assigned a coveted corner room located on the top floor of the dormitory. However, it was the smallest room in the entire building. If you cared to look out of the tiny window, placed near the ceiling, the walls of the neighboring prison facility is what you would have seen. The sign of my status on campus had been established. In every class, I was the only Black student, and I was lonely. During that school year, Father died, and I lost my vigor. With my vitality extinguished, I was no longer eager to share, to help others or myself. Years passed, and when I came to myself and re-enrolled in college, I’d been divorced and had become the mother of two. Eventually, I graduated from a HBCU. With a major in mathematics and a minor in English, I taught both subjects in a predominantly Black urban middle school. With few exceptions, over the next three years every student I taught was a student of color.*

*During that first teaching assignment, I was unaware of the literature on learning styles, yet I knew that students’ motivation to learn would not be identical. While most of my colleagues seemed consumed with behavior issues, I ventured outside contractual agreements and “other duties as assigned.” My students’ needs extended beyond what I could provide in the classroom; therefore, I visited their homes and churches, conversed with parents and became a nuisance to school counselors. Attempting to resolve student concerns became a burden that interfered with the needs of my birth children. As a single-mother, I was determined that my children would not fulfill the statistical prophecy relegated to those reared in single-parent homes. I left public school teaching.*

*While stumbling through another career, my new husband encouraged me to further my education. After completing the enrollment process at my alma mater and visiting former professors, I was offered and accepted a job at that university. Incoming freshman that had not done well on the English portion of an entrance exam would be assigned to my laboratory classes. Soon after completing my Masters’ degree, my own children were beginning middle school. I feared for them, and so I returned to public school teaching.*

*Determined not to repeat the mistakes of my previous teaching experience, I transformed myself to be even more collegial. Ideas were implemented within groups of teachers who shared similar thoughts. We would focus on developing the interests of students in a way that was meaningful to them so that learning would be optimal. With the help of a few colleagues, I founded an organization that helped our middle school students procure school supplies, get them free beauty or barber shop sessions, and a visit to their class from a local sports hero. Our motto was Stay in School-Succeed in School (SIS<sup>2</sup>).”*

### **Addie’s Story: Forever Resilient**

*“Throughout my elementary and secondary education, school was important to me. It was not always easy, but I enjoyed being there. If it were decided that I should stay home because of an illness, I would cry. Each afternoon when I would come home from school, my grandmother would insist that I read to her. Then, to the best of her ability, she*

would help me with my homework. Whether or not I had homework, books were to be brought home. As a parent, that same rule applies in my own home today.

Grandmother was the reading and writing person and Grandfather was the math man. One afternoon, after learning to compute percentages, I proudly sashayed up to my grandfather and said, "I bet I can do something you cannot do." He replied, "What is that?" I responded, "Figure percentages." I whipped out pencil and paper and began to compute percentages. Grandfather never moved from his chair. I would announce the number and he would have the answer before I could write it on my paper. A lesson in humility was being taught. Upon reflection, this incident illustrates that skill development in the affective domain is as important as the cognitive skills traditionally stressed in schools. For the most part, my elementary and junior high school experiences at African American schools were positive. However, in my small community total integration occurred during the 1968-1969 school year. As I began to matriculate in an integrated high school, my secure world was shaken.

A significant question in my mind was, "What would I do after graduation?" Serious contemplation began when I spoke with a career counselor who visited our school. After she mentioned that speech therapy would be a blossoming career in the future, I decided that's what I would endeavor to become. I held to that dream until my junior year of high school. By that time, the dream was to quickly get out of school and be on my own. Business school would fit this plan. I took all of the business courses I could fit into my schedule. As the only African American enrolled, I had to rise to the occasion and worked hard to keep up with the other students. After all, I did not want "them" (the White teacher and students that were in my class) to think I was "dumb." I passed the courses, but the experience made me realize business school was not for me. Needless to say, my career goal changed. The dream of becoming a speech therapist was then rekindled.

After reading Takaki's, *A Different Mirror* (1993), I wondered if I changed my mind about becoming a speech therapist or if my mind had been changed for me by the subtle voices of institutional racism that encouraged me to set aside my dream. Paramount during a reflection of these thoughts is an occurrence that took place during my senior year. Our senior counselor, during a conference with me after reviewing test scores that I had never seen, informed me that I should go to trade school. She stared over her glasses at a paper and never once looked at me while she made the announcement, "You should go to a trade school because you will never be able to make it in a four-year college."

### **Lovetta's Story: From Contentment to Chaos to Perseverance**

"Little did I know when I enrolled in a doctoral program in Multicultural Education at a predominately White university that I was embarking on a journey that would change my life. Before beginning doctoral studies, I taught peacefully and contentedly in an urban school district. After taking three multicultural classes taught by seasoned and skillful experts, my entire teaching world seemed to turn upside-down as I



*wrestled with a newly acquired multicultural awareness. All of a sudden, the realities of institutional and instructional racism became problematic.*

*As the fourth of eight siblings born to the union of a successful business administrator and an elementary-middle school principal, my siblings and I attended very prestigious private schools and were pampered by a personal tutor, chauffeurs, and servants. However, at an early age, I felt a deep desire to reach out to the poor and elderly. As a result, I developed many strong and frequent contacts outside my social circle. During my teens, I frequently visited groups of economically disadvantaged children to distribute candies, popcorn, and toys purchased with my savings. I decided I wanted to dedicate my life to helping the less fortunate. However, teaching in public school was not my intended destination.*

*Possessing a strong background in science, I earned a degree in Biology and planned to enroll in medical school. To that end, I obtained a Masters' in Medical Parasitology from a major university in London in order to research tropical diseases that plague children in Africa. In 1990 a civil war began in my country, where I was conducting research. Soon, my husband and I relocated from Africa to the United States. Prior to becoming a teacher in America, I worked in Africa in several professional capacities, including teacher and biomedical research assistant.*

*Job-related stress, sleepless nights from studying and writing research papers, commuting several hundred miles per week to and from doctoral classes and work, along with domestic demands, have resulted in painful experiences that I hope no other minority female has to endure. My aging process has multiplied exponentially within two years. Twice I have taken trips to the emergency room. The realization that I had turned down a full international doctoral scholarship in the medical field ten years prior left me with deep regrets. I questioned my decision to remain in a doctoral program that had placed my once organized and peaceful life in such turmoil. In some instances, I allowed opportunities to pass without interfering because I did not want to add more tension to my workplace. I falsely convinced myself that this was the American way, and I danced to the music being played.”*

### **Ellen's Story: Deconstructing Utopia**

*“I was fortunate to spend the majority of my formative years living in an affluent suburb in Ohio. My parents modeled the practice of life-long learning, and encouraged and expected their children to do well in school. The town's public schools were widely recognized and according to today's standards would be deemed exemplary. Looking back on those years, it is evident that most of my teachers and other adults embraced the colorblind perspective. The predominant attitude seemed to be that if issues of difference and identity were ignored, they would become unimportant and all would peacefully interact. There have been instances in which I remained silent in the face of injustice, and at other times I retreated from negative situations to my own comfort zone*

*However, I began to sense ripples of discontent in this supposedly idyllic setting. My second grade teacher clearly did not like one of her students, a quiet African American boy who was always impeccably dressed. At the time I could not understand*

*why she so easily became annoyed with William. This boy so agitated our teacher that often her protracted scolding of him caused her to have coughing fits. A personally transformative moment occurred one day when I went in to the cloakroom to fetch some item and discovered the teacher had William in her clutches, physically lifting him off the ground. There were no noises to indicate a struggle, and I wondered how many times in the past William had silently endured this abuse.*

*In subsequent years I noticed other signs of resistance to integration. Mr. Green was a White man who lived a few houses down from my family. He and his wife were considered paragons of virtue since they had adopted four Korean War orphans and a disabled White child. One of their children was a favorite playmate of mine. Thus, it was a sad day when my mother told me that Sara and I could henceforth only play at our home and not at hers. Apparently, Mr. Green had tried and failed to enlist my mother's support for a petition he was circulating. This highly respected man was attempting to prevent a Black family from purchasing a house on our street.*

*Over the years I developed the habit of deliberately seeking the friendship of classmates whom other students determined were the social outcasts. Often those so positioned were African American, and this did not add to my popularity. In the tenth grade, I applied for admission to the alternative school or "school within a school," a program for students deemed at-risk of dropping out. The director accused me of seeking admittance because my boyfriend was enrolled - which was partially true - and almost refused my request. She pointed out that I was taking advanced English and Greek, but I countered that I had failed algebra in the ninth grade. So I was allowed to participate. Even though I took the majority of my courses "upstairs," I could restrict my social interactions to those with whom I felt most comfortable. The alternative school seemed like a home and allowed me to retreat from the cold, depersonalized atmosphere of the larger institution.*

*Since I've always had a sense of wanderlust, when it came time to select a college my primary criteria was that it be in another state. I enrolled at an ivy-league women's college. While there were abundant opportunities there, being surrounded by wealthy, high-achieving peers created a sense of cognitive dissonance. Inner doubts crept in as it dawned on me that once again I was living in an artificially created Eden. After receiving my Bachelor's degree in Art History, with a minor in Anthropology, I relocated to Texas and then back to Ohio, where I worked for nine years in the art business. Feeling unfulfilled, I decided to return to school for an advanced degree in Cultural Anthropology.*

*I entered the university in 1995 with the intention of earning a Ph.D. in that field. However, two developments occurred along the way. While I enjoyed all my course work, I especially admired the work of postmodernists and applied anthropologists. I knew that I did not want to merely write gray literature, but that I wanted to apply the insights and methods of anthropology to enact positive changes. During this time, I also took a number of elective courses offered by the university's Education Department. One of these was an undergraduate multicultural education course. Namely, schools are institutions that mirror social patterns and which can be implicated in the perpetuation of the status quo. With a newfound interest in researching schools as cultural settings, I decided to get my Master's in anthropology and then earn my Ph.D. in education with a focus in multicultural education."*

### **Josefina's Story: Finding Coherence Amid Opposing Worldviews**

*“My father was a carpenter who did not possess a full command of the English language. He refused to speak English because he was embarrassed that he might make errors. I grew up watching him lose the most important and best paying jobs to more fluent English speakers, who in turn garnered the social connections, political power and savvy to attain the best construction jobs. Legitimizing occurred as the system of domination of certain Mexican Americans was sustained by the White people in power within the socio-cultural strata that existed in Laredo in the 1950s. Social structures allowed few Mexican Americans into the positions of power within the community. Thus, Dad spent little time at home. He usually held three jobs in order to raise my two older sisters and me.*

*Thankfully, my father's brother lived next door. He never had children of his own and spent much time teaching me myriad lessons while exposing me to wonderful outings such as carnivals, fireworks displays, and the circus. He taught me how to plant a vegetable garden, tan buck hide and make a first-rate slingshot. One evening a year before he died, he pointed up to the stars in a clear night sky. As I gazed at the constellations he had previously taught me to identify, he explained to me that what I was looking at were actually windows to heaven. He told me that when he went to be with the Lord, he would always watch down on me. He said that I would be alright. I still believe that he watches over me now.*

*The possibility of my not graduating from college was not an option with my parents. I graduated from college with a Bachelors degree in secondary education with a specialty in speech and drama. I've earned a Master's degree in Special Education along with several certifications. Family responsibilities delayed my plans of receiving a doctorate degree until a colleague told me about the joint doctoral program that was starting between the local university and the university where I am currently seeking my doctorate degree. Five Mexican American women constituted the first doctoral cohort, and I was blessed to be one of the five. Although I entered the program in 1998, in fact my journey towards becoming a multicultural educator had begun long before.*

*Growing up in public schools during the 1950s and being immersed in the Eurocentric worldview reflected in mass media and public school textbooks helped me to recognize that in many instances, children must leave their cultural identities at the school door. The history books I studied did not mention the rich history of South Texas or discuss the meaning of the seven flags (yes, not six but seven flags) that have waved over Laredo. The oral history and the nearly three hundred year old family tree that my Tia Lola Shorey taught me were not reflected in the pages of textbooks. Curricular materials were lacking my own family's experiences and the history of Mexican Americans, Spanish Americans, and Native Americans in South Texas (Alonzo, 1998). The family lore that has been passed down for generations describes the Spanish Land Grant called La Escuadra Borregena. According to family documents, our ancestors were given vast lands in South Texas. School did not reflect that reality.*

*I memorized the dates and places that I was instructed to memorize, and I did well on my exams. However, there was a lack of plurality and I understood from a personal*

*vantage point what Takaki conveyed in A Different Mirror (1993). The social construction of race occurred within the context of economic competition over land. The juxtaposition of the Spanish land grant that assigned a vast amount of land to my family and the economic reality I lived as a child made it hard to find coherence in the two opposing worldviews.”*

### **Analysis of the Narratives**

Although the students’ narratives reflect their unique perspectives, common threads united their stories. In the discussion below, quotes are used to represent the five themes that were revealed. The theme of identity and social positioning is presented from the authors as well as the authors’ students. The third theme, philosophical and theoretical frameworks, provides a context for the other themes, remaining passive or taking a stand, and career goals and aspirations. As philosophies and theoretical perspectives are altered, the students’ stance changes from acquiesce to activism. Consequently, this transformation changes their level of commitment to multicultural education along with their career goals and aspirations.

#### **Theme I - Identity and Social Positioning of the Authors**

The authors discussed how their experiences varied and what their collective stories shared in terms of how they are socially positioned. In order to describe their present situations, the authors found it necessary to speak of their identities as viewed by mainstream American society. In addressing the impact of their race or ethnicity, economic class, and geographic origins, the authors bring to light how these factors have functioned as filters on their overall life experiences. In the majority of cases, the authors speak from the margins.

Otto draws his identity from his life experiences as a member of the ranching community in South Texas, and is influenced by values of independence while at the same time recognizing that people are intertwined. Josefina also grew up on the border of the United States and Mexico. We can understand the impact of this social positioning when attending to Josefina’s words, “Most of the people in my neighborhood did not have a high school diploma. Language and culture were barriers that did not allow access to economic and social improvement. I felt the strong hegemonic hold of the social system.” However, even though Josefina felt disenfranchised, she was able to draw strength from her family. Her uncle exposed her to many things and ignited in her a sense of wonder and exploration, encouraging both a love of science and a faith in God.

Lovetta has gained a broad perspective of life due to being foreign born, having lived in various countries and having wide-ranging work experiences. As a child in Africa, she was a member of the upper class, However, in the United States, Lovetta is socially positioned as a person of color. She speaks of this change when she indicates that her educational journey has been complicated by her altered societal location. Her words demonstrate that the act of social positioning occurs on various levels, and she is aware of

the negative effects and the lack of appreciation for foreign accents and languages within the American educational system. Lovetta carries her accent with pride, as it is a marker of her identity, “Many Americans have said to me, ‘I love your accent.’ I tell them I love theirs also. They are typically startled, not realizing... that accents are relative to whoever is making a judgment.”

Ellen likewise described herself as being a member of the dominant class. She grew up in an affluent suburb where attending college was a given. Throughout her narrative, she indicates a growing awareness of how White privilege was implicated in her social position. Thus, she is uniquely positioned to empathize when White students in the multicultural education classes she teaches have difficulties understanding their own positions of privilege and she has made it a priority to help them deconstruct the myth of meritocracy.

Hattie stated that her socio-political location as an African American female has shaped not only her experiences as she has navigated through life’s journey, but has impacted her philosophies. Attending segregated public schools, she developed a strong sense of self-esteem that well equipped her for the challenges that lay ahead. At the predominantly White college, Hattie’s social location transitioned when an authority figure expressed his low expectations of her. Hattie’s inherent sense of empowerment did not position her to be a victim of self-fulfilling prophecy. Nevertheless, Hattie frequently felt invisible as classmates deliberately sat apart from her, and her professor avoided eye contact. Even though Hattie excelled at the White college, peers there continued to marginalize her.

For most of the primary grades, Samantha attended a predominantly Black elementary school where her mother taught and acted as a defender for a disabled classmate. Despite having positive experiences in all-Black educational settings, when she began college she turned down several HBCU scholarships and attended a predominantly White university. However, she experienced invisibility there, “In every class, I was the only Black student, and I was lonely.”

Addie’s early reading experiences with her grandmother helped her to develop a love of learning and an enjoyment of school. However, in high school a counselor advised her to go to trade school rather than college, based solely on her interpretation of Addie’s test scores. Addie then put aside her dream of becoming a speech therapist in order to pursue a career for which it was assumed she was better suited. In Addie’s story, we learn of a young woman who temporarily had her dream deferred, and of an adult woman who decided to not only work towards that dream but towards ensuring that all students have the opportunity to pursue their individual goals. Consequently, she adds, “I wondered if I changed my mind about becoming a speech therapist or if my mind was changed for me by the subtle voices of institutional racism.”

## **Theme II - Identity and Social Positioning of the Authors’ Students**

Many of the authors express concern with the manner in which the educational system tracks, labels, or otherwise disables children by placing them in undesirable educational categories. They critically analyze how the system limits rather than expands

opportunities by negatively positioning students in predetermined roles. The authors particularly find it troubling that so often students of color are expected to acquiesce to the notions of inferiority ascribed to them. As multicultural education scholars, the authors call into question the manner in which schools function as sorting machines, undermining children's self-esteem, and reproducing the social hierarchy.

Having experienced the damaging effects of low teacher expectations first-hand when she was a college student, Hattie shows an awareness of how schooling practices negatively position children. Hattie was disturbed by the overrepresentation of children of color in remedial courses and by the fact that few of these students ever rejoined their classmates in mainstream classes. One reason Hattie has decided to pursue a terminal degree is to influence policy regarding various facets of our educational system.

Due to her teaching experiences and a growing knowledge of multicultural education scholarship, Lovetta has also come to recognize the disparities children of color face. She described a transformative moment when she realized the pattern she witnessed in her classrooms were examples of institutional and instructional racism. "Low achievements, low performance on standardized tests, disproportionate high school drop out rates, and over-representation of minority students in all of my special educational classes – the very field that I had specialized in- began to cause me sleepless nights." Lovetta, like Samantha, began to question the disciplinary actions taken against minority students when she noted the high number of office referrals of Black and Hispanic students.

Because Lovetta has personally experienced the ravages of the effects of civil war in her homeland, it is striking that she used terminology associated with warfare in her description of American educational practices, "Everyday innocent children are led like sheep to be slaughtered ...and to what I refer to as 'psychological genocide.'" Several other authors reiterated the idea that too often students, especially those deemed to be different, are positioned negatively by the educational system. The authors are united in their stance that historic and ongoing ideological and structural barriers need to be dismantled if the educational system is to ever truly accomplish its purported goal of providing opportunities for upward mobility.

### **Theme III - Philosophical and Theoretical Frameworks**

Each of the authors has extensive knowledge of the educational system, having over the years served in the roles of student as well as educator. In many cases they have drawn on their own schooling experiences, both positive and negative, when they have addressed the various demands they now face as teacher-educators. For example, they have attempted to make learning pertinent for students. Even prior to developing knowledge of multicultural education philosophies or culturally relevant pedagogy, the authors intuitively knew to implement best practices in order to reach all learners. A familiarity with the literature has subsequently reinforced their belief that all children are capable of achieving when content is delivered in a meaningful way.

As a teacher, Otto's educational philosophy has developed as a result of reflecting on life experiences. Exposure to multicultural research allowed him to examine his role as

an educator in a new light, and the doctoral program led him to become cognizant of the importance of culturally relevant teaching. Otto has decided to work for wholesale systems change by applying his insights to schools at the teacher and/or administrator levels.

Samantha recognizes that teacher efficacy is increased when teachers possess an understanding of their students. She noted that in order to reach students, teachers must be aware of and sensitive to students' concerns and their reactions to various pedagogical approaches. In her school, Samantha created a highly successful program, Stay In School; Succeed in School, which established a link between school culture and community cultures. Using local resources in the form of school supplies and people, she expanded the reach of traditional schooling practices in a manner similar to the Funds of Knowledge program (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). Her actions reflect her belief that teachers need to incorporate in-situ student knowledge into the curriculum, thereby validating that knowledge and by extension validating the students.

#### **Theme IV- Remaining Passive or Taking a Stand**

Although the authors speak with conviction about their plans to improve the educational system, they have developed their stances over time. They have not always felt their current sense of empowerment to enact change, and have in fact at times accepted the status quo even while questioning its validity. It is indeed some of the authors' experiences of being unwitting accomplices to hegemonic practices that now dictate their desire to restructure the nature of schooling. In listening to the authors reflect upon their journeys, we hear evidence of them wrestling with conflicting emotions and inner doubts (Bloom, 1998) when they were confronted with situations in which they felt powerless to help students or themselves.

Lovetta reported that numerous opportunities to express her opinion presented themselves, but she did not interfere because, "I falsely convinced myself that this was the American way, and therefore I danced to the music being played." As a relative newcomer to the United States and to her school, Lovetta believed that it was not her position to confront her superiors even though she felt they were in the wrong. In a similar manner, Ellen related that as a child she witnessed a teacher physically abusing an African American classmate in the cloakroom. Rather than challenge the authority of the teacher, Ellen instead opted to ignore what she saw; "There have been instances in which I remained silent in the face of injustice, and at other times I retreated from negative situations to my own comfort zone."

As a counterpoint to instances of remaining passive, many of the authors eventually found that their consciences caused them to be unable to remain silent in the face of oppression. No longer willing to be a cog in a dysfunctional processing machine, several of the authors described situations in which they voiced their opinions, and then suffered repercussions. Lovetta found herself ostracized from co-workers and her outspokenness earned her a negative reputation with the entire school staff, "My resistance to comply with previously unquestioned educational practices cast me as a renegade."

Lovetta empathizes with students who speak out, “Those that do resist such acts of injustice get labeled as problem students.”

Samantha was so disturbed by the patterns she witnessed in the schools that she turned her attention to the possibilities of what her own children might be encountering in their respective schools, “It was determined that my children would not fulfill the statistical prophecy relegated to those reared in single-parent homes.” Feeling that she could best serve her children by encouraging them at home, Samantha temporarily left the teaching profession.

### **Theme V - Career Goals and Aspirations**

The life journeys that have resulted in the authors choosing a career in multicultural education have been as unique as the authors themselves. However, in each case the participants have examined with critical lenses educational philosophies and practices that serve as hindrances to children’s scholastic and social achievement. As they near the final stages of their doctoral program, the authors prepare to join those professionals who espouse that schooling should be emancipatory rather than repressive.

Addie plans to use her resiliency for beneficial purposes by teaching and advising pre-service teachers in a university setting. Ellen likewise intends to work with pre-service teachers, instilling in them the awareness that differences should be seen as assets rather than liabilities in order to combat the fallacy that a colorblind perspective is kind or benign. Lovetta plans to teach both pre-service and in-service teachers multicultural education theories and practices via her work as an academic and in workshops for practicing teachers. Eventually, Lovetta would like to draw on her background in the medical profession and in education and counseling to help underserved populations on an international level.

Samantha feels that she will positively impact the educational system by working with university programs that assists college students’ transition as teachers to urban schools. Josefina hopes to emulate the dedication of her committee chairperson by serving as a mentor to others. In particular, she feels a responsibility to students of color because she knows from personal experience that they must contend with numerous obstacles as they navigate through American culture.

Otto desires to work in a public school setting to enact systemic changes as he encourages students to develop a love of learning that will equip them with the tools they need in society. Hattie articulated three intended agendas to pursue as a professor. She wants to model teaching practices that demonstrate that she values all people, so that none of her students has to experience the sense of invisibility she felt as a college student. Secondly, Hattie intends to work with veteran teachers, “since many of them have not been formally exposed to principles and practices of multicultural education and because they exert a great deal of influence on the classroom practices of beginning teachers.” Finally, she plans to “pursue a personal research agenda that critically examines the link among school disciplinary policies, teacher-student interaction, alternative education and the criminal justice system as it relates to CLEED students.”



## Summary

So often in academia, students and faculty alike seem to be perpetually stuck in a fast-forward mode. Yet these students took the time to stop and reflect on where they have been and where they are heading. Each also recognized the value of hearing the personal accounts of peers. Ladson-Billings (1994) explains that in the search for best practices, often decision-makers are overlooking the obvious - the personal experiences of successful teachers. These students address that polemic and thus, have attempted to begin the process of filling a void in the literature.

For the most part, the authors of these narratives encountered twists in the road that delayed their journeys. Life experiences worked in a variety of ways to bring each of them to the present point; yet, they have learned valuable lessons during the journey. Challenges, initially seen as obstacles, eventually were overcome and as such, served to strengthen their commitment to assist children facing oppression in schools or society.

The emotions expressed by these seven doctoral students regarding their lives and their quests to obtain their doctorate degrees ranged from sadness to joy. As they have stated in their narratives, the journey has not been easy for any of them. Although each of the students recounted painful events either encountered or witnessed, they were all able to reflect on their life stories with a scholarly understanding of the issues. Due to their ongoing professional development, they now possess a language that helps them to identify critical incidents that have impacted their lives and the lives of others. The authors shared experiences of empowerment, validation, and commitment to action for social justice. They view themselves as change agents and advocates for students, and each credits recruitment and retention efforts, individual programs of study, and the scholars who recruited them for personal and professional growth and development.

Why share these stories? A student who attended and evaluated the group's presentation at the 2003 National Association for Multicultural Education Conference captures the impact the stories had on her personally, providing at least one answer to this question. She left a note for the presentation panelists that read, "I want to express my appreciation for your session. You have given me the affirmation to continue with my advanced degree." We not only recognize the necessity and power of critical analysis and reflection in the professional development process, but we offer our personal accounts in order to share our struggles and successes in the hope that others will be moved to do likewise. Our journeys have been difficult but richly rewarding, and we encourage others to seek the advanced degrees that will prepare them to become the next generation of teacher educators.

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