# Intercultural Sensitivity and Cultural Competence: Perceptions from Pre-Service Teachers Who Completed a Technology-Mediated Community Exploration Project

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**Abstract:** *Teachers enter the classroom with different cultural backgrounds and experiences than their students. The course subject content, curriculum, instructional pedagogy, and teacher interactions can either support or impede student learning and development. A qualitative research design and phenomenographic methodology was used to explore the perceptions of Fifty-seven graduate level pre-service teacher preparation students who completed a technology-mediated community exploration project. Bennett's (1986, 2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) provided the conceptual foundation for the study. The purpose of the study was to use a phenomenographic methodology to explore pre-service teacher preparation students' perceptions about the influence of culture on instruction, interpersonal interaction, and learning within a culturally diverse classroom environment. Emergent perceptual categories of description identified are organized and discussed in the context of the conceptual framework of Bennett's (2017) ethno-centric and ethno-relative stages of increasing sensitivity to cultural differences. Five categories of description included: (a) failure to recognize the relevance of culturally different others; (b) recognizing biased and stereotyped views of other cultures; (c) minimizing cultural differences; (f) acceptance of cultural differences; and (e) adaptation to cultural differences.*

## Introduction

The cultural landscape of the United States (U.S.) has changed over the last century with increased immigration into the country of peoples from diverse, racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds (Rios & Cohen, 2022; Smith, 2021). In multi-cultural communities, members hold divergent worldviews (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). A worldview represents a cultural lens for perceiving reality that shapes assumptions, beliefs, values, meaning-making, behaviors, and interactions in intra (within) and inter (outside) cultural environments (Koltko-Rivera, 2004; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). While diversity encompasses a wide range of characteristics, the focus of the study was delimited to identifying the different experiences of pre-service teachers taking a technology-mediated course intended to improve cultural awareness as students explored their cultural worldview and how it may affect their teaching in a multi-cultural classroom.

Teachers enter the classroom with different cultural backgrounds and experiences than their students. The course subject content, curriculum, instructional pedagogy, and teacher interactions can either support or impede student learning and development (Bennett, 2017; Bottiani, Larson, Debnam, Bischoff, & Bradshaw, 2018). U.S. teachers are predominantly Caucasian, female, middle class, monolingual, and from a Western European cultural background. They teach from Euro-centric curricular and pedagogical foundations in classrooms with increasingly racial, ethnic, and culturally diverse student populations (Gay, 2018; Romijn, Lost, & Leseman, 2021; van Werven, Coelen, Jansen, & Hofman, 2021). The majority of educators entering the workforce with this Western European worldview are not prepared adequately to teach in a multi-cultural environment (Gay, 2018; Romijn et al., 2021).

Curricula and pedagogy are powerful culturally-embedded mechanisms that drive instructional strategies and learning processes in the classroom. Developers of pre-service teacher preparation programs recognize that in addition to acquiring subject knowledge and pedagogical skill, it is equally important to develop comprehensive teacher practices that meet the needs of a culturally diverse student population (Banjeree & Luckner, 2014; Michel & Kuiken, 2014; Romjin et al., 2021; Slot, Romijn, & Nata, 2019). Toward this goal, pre-service teacher education programs are providing opportunities for students to develop an awareness and deeper understanding of cultural differences that exist within society (Romjin et al., 2021). They are encouraged to explore how their socio-cultural worldview serves as a lens through which they respond to others from cultures outside their own (Romjin et al., 2021). The purpose of the study was to use a

phenomenographic methodology to explore pre-service teacher preparation students' perceptions about the influence of culture on instruction, interpersonal interaction, and learning within a culturally diverse classroom environment.

## Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culture strongly influences attitudes, values, and behaviors that teachers and students bring into the instructional and learning environment (Gay, 2018). Student interaction, engagement, and learning in the classroom is facilitated through culturally competent teaching that goes beyond superficial cultural awareness and recognition of cultural differences toward accepting and respecting the different worldviews, values, traditions, and ways of interacting (Gay, 2018). Culturally responsive teaching takes into consideration that culture is deeply embedded in any instructional and learning process. Therefore, teachers must adapt and operationalize the curriculum and pedagogy to reflect cultural differences among students (Eliyahu-Levi & Ganz-Meishar, 2020). This provides a learning environment where academic tasks are more in line with a student's cultural background rather than forcing students to function under cultural conditions that are unnatural and unfamiliar to them (Gay, 2018; Romjin et al., 2021). Removing or at least lessening the cultural barriers to learning helps students find relevance and meaning to what they are studying (Gay, 2018). The challenge is to balance and match instructional techniques, multiple approaches, and links to the subject material that takes into account differing learning styles among the diverse student population in the classroom (Eliyahu-Levi & Ganz-Meishar, 2020; Gay, 2018).

Verbal and non-verbal communication is grounded in one's cultural background, traditions, values and socialization that influences and encodes how people think, talk about, see, attend to or ignore, and interact with one another (Gay, 2018). Curricular and instructional techniques situated within the lived experience and worldview of students makes the subject content more relevant, meaningful, and engaging (Eliyahu-Levi & Ganz-Meishar, 2020; Gay, 2018). Culturally responsive teachers recognize the power of images, symbols, icons, mottoes, and other artifacts that reflect the knowledge, values, ethical principles, rules, social etiquette, and ways of behaving from different cultural perspectives (Gay, 2018). Therefore, teachers incorporate these cultural characteristics into lessons that might deal with controversial topics, study of culturally different individuals and groups, and contextualizing issues within multiple kinds of knowledge and perspectives from different racial, class, ethnic, and gender groups (Gay, 2018).

Central to culturally responsive teaching is expanding one's knowledge base about cultural diversity and understanding the cultural characteristics and contributions of different cultural groups to create more relevant and meaningful learning environment (Gay, 2018). Taking the time to acquire factual information about the history, heritage, traditions, and other characteristics of specific cultural groups enables teachers to create culturally responsive curricular and pedagogical foundations for the subject content (Bottiani, Larson, Debnam, Dischoff, & Bradshaw, 2018; Eliyahu-Levi & Ganz-Meishar, 2020; Gay, 2018).

In addition to knowledge acquisition, culturally responsive teaching involves the ability to engage in cross-cultural communication and form intercultural relationships that improve teacher-students and student-student communication and interactions (Gay, 2018; Romjin et al., 2021). Teachers who expand their cultural understanding are able to communicate and interact from different cultural perspectives that enable them to connect more meaningfully with students (Bottiani et al., 2018; Gay, 2018). Cultural knowledge and instructional techniques can be utilized to design the course curricula, lessons, and learning activities to promote communication and interaction in the classroom (Eliyahu-Levi & Ganz-Meishar, 2020; Gay, 2018). This builds a culturally responsive learning community within the classroom that is anchored in sharing, integrity, and respect toward others (Gay, 2002).

It becomes challenging to form connections and intercultural relationships with students if the teacher fails to accept or appreciate the richness of cultural diversity (Gay, 2018). Making strategic connection can be facilitated with students through discussion and inclusion of cultural history, heritage, and traditions to tap into their lived world. As teachers develop greater intercultural sensitivity and build cross-cultural relationships, they are positioned better to adapt their curriculum and pedagogy to link subject content in ways that are more engaging and meaningful for students (Bennett, 2017). A culturally responsive and engaging classroom is manifested through the inclusion of multicultural art and literature, content about historical figures or events from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, and collaborative activities that

provide opportunities for students to share their cultural background and experiences with their peers across different cultures (Gay, 2018).

Through strengthening intercultural sensitivity and cultural competence, teachers demonstrate greater acknowledgement and attention to cultural influences in instruction and learning and the overall importance of treating culture as important to competent teaching (Bennett, 2017). There is a continued challenge to integrate culturally responsive content into the formal curricula that is culturally relevant to those who do not conform to the dominant cultural group history, traditions, attitudes, worldview, and ways of acting in the world (Gay, 2018). By incorporating students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences into the curriculum, teachers can build cultural awareness and disrupt "anglo" Western European cultural bias in the instructional and learning process. In a culturally response classroom teachers link curriculum and subject content lessons to students' lived experiences, interests, and cultural backgrounds. Teachers are challenged to collaborate with students to drive the learning process by engaging them in shaping lessons to explore important issues relevant to the course content. Cross-cultural lessons are developed by tapping into community programs and activities that are used to connect broader issues in the curriculum to create lessons with a more local context and relevance for students. Ultimately, culturally responsive pedagogy, curricula, lessons, and activities can create a culturally rich and inclusive learning environment that facilitates interest, engagement, learning, and inter-cultural relationships among the teacher and students and among students with their peers.

The ultimate goal of culturally responsive teaching is to engage all members of the school community (leaders, teachers, school personnel, students, parents, and community members) in adopting a common vision and mission that recognizes cultural diversity and the importance of creating a culturally responsive educational environment. This is a challenge in a society where people are at different levels of multicultural awareness and the ability to move in out of different cultural contexts to engage in meaningful interactions with diverse cultural groups (Bennett, 2017, Gay, 2018).

## Theoretical Framework: Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

Bennett's (1986, 2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) provided the conceptual foundation for the study. The model was developed based on formal observations of cross-cultural dynamics in schools, communities, and organizations with the purpose of explaining the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral determinants in how people behave in diverse cultural contexts and their level of sensitivity to intercultural differences (Bennett, 1998). Bennett (1998) described culture as a set of similar constructs or cognitive patterns, perspective-taking strategies, and socio-emotional reactions held by a group that represent a worldview or lens for interpreting reality and responds to experience and events in differing cultural contexts (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Bennett, 2017). Cultural group members behave according to shared perceptions of the group's collective worldview (Bennett, 2017).

A key assumption of the DMIS is that reality is constructed through the subjective internal organization of experience. The boundary that differentiates the self from others guides how one experiences intercultural events (Bennett, 2017). Perceptions represent internal categories of relevant things while culture provides the figure/ground distinction between what is considered relevant and irrelevant (Bennett, 1998). Communicating and interacting across cultures is not a natural process because perceptual categories of outside or "other" groups are not typically well-defined and thus obscure distinctions of unique cultural perspectives (Bennett, 2017).

The ability to acknowledge, accept, and adapt to different inter-cultural contexts was described by Bennett (2017) as intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural sensitivity is an important characteristic of cultural competence as it encompasses observing, listening, and respecting the cultural backgrounds and worldviews of people from outside one's own cultural group (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Bennett, 2017; Romjin et al., 2021). The higher the level of intercultural sensitivity development, the more readily individuals are able to understand the cultural perspectives of others, have complex personal experiences, and engage in meaningful communication and behaviors in cross-cultural interactions (Bennett, 2017).

According to Bennett (2017), cultural sensitivity is strengthened through a process of awareness of cultural similarities and differences, open-mindedness, empathy, reflection, and self-monitoring of attitudes, and behaviors grounded in cultural biases (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Bennett, 2017). Attitude represents a system of beliefs and ideas that predispose an individual to respond in a preferential manner (Romjin et al.,

2021). Individuals with positive intercultural attitudes are open to and respect other cultural beliefs, worldviews, and behaviors (Romjin et al., 2021).

**Criticism and Weaknesses of the DMIS:** A criticism of the DMIS is that it is based on a thick description of human behavior and therefore subjective in nature (Bennett, 2017). There can be a lack of congruency between the DMIS theoretical stages of development and what is observed in practice. Also, the DMIS places a focus on modeling levels of change; however, the model is weak on defining properties that constitute intercultural sensitivity and competency growth from ethno-centric toward ethno-relative stages. However, research findings have supported the relevance of the DMIS stage descriptions and the model has been used successfully for two decades to develop curriculum for intercultural teacher training programs (Bennett & Hammer, 1998).

**Six Stages of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS):** The DMIS describes six stages that represent movement from ethno-centric toward progressively more sophisticated ethno-relative worldviews and intercultural sensitivity (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Bennett, 2017). Movement through the stages is not one-way or permanent but represents a fluid development where "each stage is meant to characterize a treatment of cultural difference that is fairly consistent for a particular individual at a particular point of development" (Bennett, 2017).

**Ethno-Centric Stages of Intercultural Sensitivity:** The first three DMIS stages of denial, defense, and minimization are classified in terms of an ethno-centric perspective from which individuals use their own cultural worldview and set of standards to evaluate and interact within different cultural contexts (Bennett, 1998). There is a failure to acknowledge cultural differences by denying they exist, raising defenses against them, or minimizing their importance (Bennett, 1998).

**Stage 1-Denial of Cultural Differences:** The denial stage is marked by a failure to recognize cultural distinctions and the relevance of culturally different others and ways of behaving (Bennett, 2017). Individuals act and interact from a worldview that their culture is superior and the only true and valid culture. People from other cultural groups are viewed as less complex and lumped into vague homogenized categories defined by stereotypes that view others as physically and intellectually inferior with deficiencies in character and moral traits. Those in the denial stage seek out and associate with culturally similar others and are not motivated to learn about or experience other cultures (Bennett, 1998).

**Stage 2-Defense against Cultural Differences:** Movement from the denial to the defense stage is marked by a sense of cultural superiority and "us" versus "them" mentality toward outside cultural groups; groups that pose a threat to one's cultural identity (Bennett, 2017). Negative stereotyped beliefs about other cultures promote fear, protectionist, and segregationist strategies to keep one's cultural life separate from other cultures (Bennett, 2017; Van Hook, 2000). Individuals feel attacked and victimized in discussions about racism, bigotry, and cultural bias (Bennett, 2017).

**Stage 3-Minimization of Cultural Differences:** The third ethno-centric stage is characterized by movement away from an "us" and "them" mentality through attempts to minimize differences and emphasize similarities between one's own and other cultures (Bennett, 2017). Beliefs and behaviors of one's own culture are viewed as universal and shared by others. Cultural differences are treated as merely biological deviations and people are seen as essentially the same with core values that transcend cultural barriers (Bennett, 2017). A focus on cultural similarities generates tolerance of other cultures, though preference is still given to one's own culture (Bennett, 2017). Minimizing cultural differences is a means of avoiding learning about and acknowledging other cultures, confronting one's cultural biases, and interacting meaningfully in different cultural contexts.

**Ethno-Relative Stages of Intercultural Sensitivity:** The last three DMIS stages of acceptance, adaptation, and integration are classified in terms of an ethno-relative perspective in which one's own culture is experienced within the context of other cultural worldviews (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Bennett, 2017). The ethno-relative orientation is marked by approaching cultural differences either by accepting them as important, adapting and taking into account cross-cultural perspectives, or by integrating diverse cultural perspectives and ways of behaving into one's self-identity (Bennett, 1998).

Communication and behaviors can be understood only relative to one another within a cultural context (Bennett, 1998). Individuals develop a level of intercultural sensitivity and competency in adapting their communication and behaviors to different cultural customs and standards. This allows for effective cross-cultural interactions and meaningful relationships outside their own socio-cultural contexts (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Bennett, 2017). People become more adept at acting interculturally in their communication and behaviors with an openness and sensitivity to cultural differences, traditions, and values (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021).

**Stage 4-Acceptance of Cultural Differences:** The first ethno-relative stage of acceptance involves individuals acknowledging that cultural differences exist and are as complex as one's own (Bennett, 2017). People are able to recognize and accept cultural diversity, though unable to change their behavior in a different cultural context to communicate more effectively (Bennett, 2017). Acceptance does not indicate that one prefers or agrees with other cultural values or behaviors but represents the recognition that cultural differences exist through which reality is viewed and how values, beliefs, and behaviors are shaped. Individuals value and respect different cultural worldviews, ways of behaving, and interacting with others (Bennett, 1998). There is a curiosity and interest in other cultures and a desire to form cross-cultural interactions and relationships that may have been avoided in the past (Bennett, 1998). Due to limited prior interactions with those outside one's own culture, there often is difficulty in adapting communication and behaviors in diverse cultural contexts (Bennett, 2017). Growth in cultural sensitivity and competence is promoted by working to view the world through the lens of a different culture (Bennett & Hammer, 1998).

**Stage 5-Adaptation to Cultural Difference:** Those in the second ethno-relative stage of adaptation use their knowledge about cultural differences to form and strengthen cross-cultural relationships (Bennett, 2017). Individuals are able to expand their worldview and adapt their communication and behavior to interact meaningfully in different cultural contexts (Bennett, 2017). Adaptation is not assimilation, that is, people do not abandon or lose their primary cultural identity to operate effectively in inter-cultural situations. Adaptation involves perspective taking or empathy that facilitates the ability to experience the world through a different cultural lens and behave authentically and appropriately in cross-cultural interactions (Bennett, 2017).

**Stage 6-Integration of Cultural Differences:** During the third ethno-relative stage of integration, one's self-identity is expanded allowing for the internalization of multicultural awareness and the ability to move in and out of different cultural contexts (Bennett, 2017). Individuals are able to combine aspects of their identity into a new whole and experience reality from a different cultural frame of reference through the integration of cross-cultural perspectives into their own cultural worldview (Bennett, 1986, 2017). Competency is developed in communicating and behaving authentically with people from diverse cultural groups through the ability to construct cultural bridges for more meaningful interactions (Bennett, 1998, 2017; Bennett & Hammer, 1998).

## Teacher Preparation Program Cultural Competence Component

Both teacher and students come into the classroom with a set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions about their own and other cultures (Romjin et al., 2021; Spies, Lyons, Huerta, Garza, & Reding, 2017). Learning processes are influenced by the ability of the teacher to engage in intercultural communication with students through the use of contact skills that take into consideration cultural similarities and differences (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Romjin et al., 2021). Through communication and cross-cultural interaction, teachers are able to validate the cultural lens through which their students view reality and use this as a resource to enrich the instructional and learning environment (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021).

How people think they would act and how they actually act do not always align. People tend to overestimate their openness to other cultures, with a gap between their implicit and explicit acceptance of diversity (Alvarez-Valdivia & Gonzalez-Montoto, 2018; Romjin et al., 2021). This gap can be narrowed by providing opportunities for teachers to critically reflect on their belief systems, assumptions, and core values to expand their understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity that transfer to the real-world context (Bennett, 2017; Romjin et al., 2021). Pre-service teacher preparation programs have been effective in facilitating growth in intercultural sensitivity and the ability to form positive cross-cultural relationships through cultural competency courses (Bennett, 2017; Bottiani, Larson, Debnam, Bischoff, & Bradshaw, 2018; Civitillo,

Juang, & Schachner, 2018; Parkhouse, Lu, & Massaro, 2019; Romjin et al., 2021). Cultural competence involves understanding, valuing, and respecting the worldview of other cultures (Alvarez & Gonzalez, 2018; Pastori et al., 2018; Romjin et al., 2021). Cultural competence and intercultural sensitivity encompasses more than knowing about a different culture, it involves the competence to evaluate the points of view and experiences in one's own as well as other cultures and modify one's attitude and behaviors in different cultural contexts (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021).Teacher preparation programs that include a cultural competence component help pre-service educators develop skill in using cultural knowledge and frames of references to connect with students by adapting curriculum and instructional pedagogy to create more relevant and meaningful learning encounters (Gay, 2018; Romjin et al., 2021).

Confronting and changing one's cultural assumptions, stereotypes, and biases often involves a process of examining the cultural lens through which one interprets reality and acts in the world. Through curricular activities and field experiences that promote reflection and discussion on cultural diversity issues, students are provided with opportunities to become more aware and conscious of their own cultural background and worldview and recognize that other cultures experience the world through a difference cultural lens (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Bennett, 2017; Civitillo et al., 2018; Romjin et al., 2021). Reflection involves an active, persistent, and thoughtful consideration of issues, events, and experiences to expand understanding and appreciation for cultural differences and how one's biases and stereotypes affect intercultural communication and interactions (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 2013; Romjin et al., 2021). Cultural sensitivity and competency training often focus on how to:

- promote awareness about the lived experiences of people and students from other cultures, especially non-dominant cultures;

- create awareness about how the dominant Euro-centric western culture-based school structures, policies, and practices marginalizes students who identify from non-dominant cultures;

- develop and maintain a learning environment that acknowledges, honors, and respects different cultures and cultural worldviews and ways of behaving; and

- create a culturally responsive classroom that can addresses culture-based issues or situations. (Bennett, 2017; Bottiani et al., 2018; Gay, 2018; Gorski & Parekh, 2020).

The goal of the reflection process and supportive activities is to promote open-mindedness, empathy, and self-monitoring of attitudes and behaviors grounded in cultural biases (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Bennett, 2017). The challenge of critical reflection is to translate insights and knowledge into action (Romjin et al., 2021). The use of written assignment that involve reflective journaling can promote re-thinking about culture and cultural differences through personal assessment of values, assumptions, beliefs, and actions to gain insight into one's explicit and implicit attitudes and biases towards diversity and how it can affect classroom practices (Romjin et al., 2021). Active guided reflection through structured activities facilitates deeper exploration and critical examination of belief systems and biases (Romjin et al., 2021). Important to reflection is coupling it with activities to promote transfer of changed beliefs systems and behaviors in real-world contexts and practices (Bennett, 2017; Romjin et al., 2021). It is important to give students opportunities to put new insights and knowledge in action through activities that increases sociocultural awareness and the incorporation of intercultural sensitive practices in the school context (; Romjin et al., 2021). However, the effectiveness of cultural competence courses is highly dependent on student readiness to engage in critical self-reflection and motivation for change in light of new insights in how their cultural biases, values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors influence their effectiveness as educators in a multi-cultural classroom environment (Romjin et al., 2021).

Overall, professional development programs that include a cultural competence component facilitate growth in intercultural sensitivity help teachers put new knowledge and understanding into practice using culturally sensitive and relevant curricula, pedagogy, and interactional strategies that promote student engagement, learning, and understanding of subject content (Romjin et al., 2021). Cultural competence activities coupled with critical reflection assist pre-service teachers to work through cultural conflict and disequilibrium to reduce the cultural biases they may bring to their curriculum, pedagogy, and subject content activities (Bennett, 2017; Gay, 2018).

## Methods

A qualitative research design and phenomenographic methodology was used to explore the perceptions of Fifty-seven graduate level pre-service teacher preparation students who completed a technology-mediated community exploration project. Participants completed a Google Maps project to assist them in gaining insight into how their perceptions about the community in which their students live might influence both positively and negatively their curricular and pedagogical approaches to teaching and interacting with a culturally diverse student population.

Phenomenography is a qualitative interpretive approach used to explore the subjective experience of a phenomenon through identifying and describing a finite set of related meanings that emerge out of individual subjective interpretations from their experiences with that phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997). What is known about a phenomenon is gained through identifying the meanings developed from the collective individual experiences about it (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997). The focus of phenomenography is to identify the different ways a phenomenon can be experienced and understood by exploring the "what" and "how" of perceptions created out of an individual's intentional reflection on a specific phenomenon and identify the different ways people experience and understand that phenomenon within their individual worldview or frame of reference (Marton, 1981, 1986). Fundamental to phenomenography is that the nature of reality is subjective and this reality is only known through a process of subjective interpretation and meaning construction of personal experiences (Creswell, 2012; Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997). Therefore, phenomenography includes both study participants' descriptions of their experiences and reflection on these experiences: what Marton (1981, 1986) called a second-order perspective.

**Sample Population:** The study sample was comprised of a convenience sample of fifty-seven students who volunteer to participate in the study. Students were recruited from a graduate pre-service teacher preparation program course taught at a university located in the western region of the Unites State. While a more diverse study sample was desired, recruitment efforts resulted in a fairly heterogenous group predominantly from a Caucasian Western-European cultural background.

**Data Source and Collection:** A technology-mediated community exploration project was part of an upper-level pre-service teacher preparation course with a 30-hour fieldwork practicum that included instruction on content standards within a culturally response teaching context. Students completed a Google Maps project with the purpose of facilitating teacher exploration of a selected community. Students were asked to reflect of how increased awareness of the history and culture of that community would influence their teaching and interaction with students in a multicultural classroom. A 3 to 5 page paper as part of the Google Maps project comprised the study data set. The goal of the Google Maps project was to foster a deeper understanding of the contribution of community culture, history, and traditions in the lives of students and use these insights to challenge faulty cultural perceptions and assumptions when making curricular and pedagogical decisions. Participants were encouraged to describe concrete examples of their experiences while completing the Google Maps project. The context, tone, and direction of the perceptions and insights discussed were determined by the participant. To protect the anonymity of study participants, students were identified using numerical codes in the data set, information gathered was viewed only by the researcher, and no identifying information was used in the findings (Creswell, 2012).

**Data Analysis-Developing Descriptive Categories:** The analysis process involved developing descriptive categories representing different pre-service teacher preparation students' perceptions about exploring a community's culture, history, and resources to create a more culturally inclusive and engaging learning environment (Marton & Booth, 1997). The goal was to identify and categorize different participant understandings (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Marton & Booth, 1997).

Through an iterative process of elimination and reduction, expressions of perceptions were assessed for mutual exclusivity with vague and repetitive perceptions eliminated and relevant perceptions clustered into thematic descriptive categories (Marton, 1981; Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997). The coding process was guided by identifying patterns and themes related to indicators of community awareness and reflection on incorporating community culture, history, and resource contributions into teaching practices and curriculum development. The iterative process continued until no new categories emerged from the data analysis process. Relevant perceptions/expressions were compared against the student papers as a means of

validating the compatibility of the descriptive categories (Marton & Booth, 1997). Categories of description identified through a phenomenographic analysis are described and discussed using the lens of Bennett's (2017) development model of intercultural sensitivity. Pre-service teacher preparation students' perceptions of using community culture, history, and resources to create a more culturally inclusive pedagogy and curriculum included: (a) failure to recognize the relevance of culturally different others; (b) recognizing biased and stereotyped views of other cultures; (c) minimizing cultural differences; (d) acceptance of cultural differences; and (e) adaptation to cultural differences. Categories were described and illustrated using verbatim text from the student papers to represent structures of participant perceptions.

To limit the introduction of researcher bias while developing categories of description, the researcher documented the development of categories during data analysis and worked to bracket preconceptions and judgments through an on-going process of self-reflection and identification of personal opinions and perceptions that might have affected the ability to understand accurately participants' experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2012). The data analysis steps are described briefly in Table 1.

**Table 1: Phenomenographic Data Analysis Steps for Identification of Categories of Description**

| Steps in Analysis Process | Purpose/Goal |
|---|---|
| 1. Familiarization | • Read students papers (data source) three or more times to gain a holistic sense of the data. |
| 2. Compilation | • Make a list of relevant expressions from the student papers.<br>• Identify/organize expressions into related groups.<br>• Assess expressions for mutual exclusivity with vague and repetitive expression eliminated.<br>• Mark direct quotes from student papers for possible inclusion as category descriptors. |
| 3. Preliminary grouping | • Through an iterative process, develop a preliminary hierarchy of logically consistent categories of description.<br>• Develop tentative titles and short descriptions for categories. |
| 4. Preliminary comparison and category of description refinement | • Check preliminary categories of description against student papers to improve clarity of thematic groups for each category.<br>• Select quotes from student papers that best represent each category of description. |
| 5. Produce the final set of categories of description | • Through a process of comparison and contrast, develop the final set of categories based on key elements and distinguishing features that set each category apart from other categories.<br>• Select textual quotes to illustrate critical aspects of each category. |

**Note: Analysis steps derived from Marton & Booth (1997) and Ornek (2008)**

**Trustworthiness of the Research Findings:** In phenomenographic research, methods for assessing internal and external validity, reliability, generalizability, and objectivity of the study findings are evaluated using approaches described by Guba (1981) that include assessing the trustworthiness or truth value: credibility (internal validity); dependability (reliability); confirmability (objectivity); and transferability (generalizability). Credibility and confirmability were assessed by examining the extent the phenomenon description was congruent with reality, checking for distortion and misinterpretations introduced during category development, and detailing the research process used to elicit experiential descriptions of the phenomenon studied (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). Dependability of the trustworthiness of the study findings was attained through limiting the introduction of personal bias into the study using audit techniques that included journalizing the research process, using verbatim text from student papers, documenting the development of categories during data analysis, and linking in readily discernible ways the interpretations, assertions, and conclusions drawn from data analysis and synthesis (Creswell, 2012; Guba, 1981). Finally, transferability or the extent the results of the study are applicable to other situations was demonstrated by providing a rich description of the categories identified from the student paper data (Creswell, 2012).

**Limitations of the Research Design:** There were limitations to the research design that could affect the findings reported. The sample was derived by a convenience sample of students enrolled in a pre-service

teacher preparation program upper-division course during a single semester. Lack of true random assignment was not problematic because the study was qualitative and descriptive in nature and no experimental groups were used. The self-selection of study participants may have produced a sample not representative of pre-service teacher preparation program students and introduced bias in the analysis of the data collected (Creswell, 2012). Difficulty achieving data saturation could have posed a limitation due to missing information relevant to the study (Marton & Booth, 1997).

In terms of the phenomenographic based research, a limitation of this approach was difficulty determining when data saturation was achieved because each participant's experience was unique (Marton & Booth, 1997). Because data was derived from student papers, there was no opportunity to dialogue with students and thus limited the ability of students to fully share their experiences or for the researcher to ask question to clarify or expand on their insights (Marton & Booth, 1997). Finally, students were aware that the course instructor would read their assignment papers and thus the content of the papers may have been influenced by viewpoints and biases held by the researcher that were verbally or non-verbally communicated during the course over the semester. Students may have consciously or unconsciously described less their true perceptions and more perceptions in line with what they believed was the researchers' expectations (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000).

## Results

A phenomenographic analysis was conducted on a written assignment completed by pre-service teachers who were asked to reflect their own and their students' cultural history, heritage, and customs. Pre-service teachers were asked to examine how their assumptions and attitudes affected inter-personal interactions, instruction, and learning processes in a culturally diverse classroom. Perceptual categories identified in the phenomenographical analysis were described and illustrated using direct quotes from student papers to represent structures of participant perceptions (Marton & Booth, 1997. In this section, study participants are referred to according to the number identification assigned to each student paper. Emergent perceptual categories of description identified are organized and discussed in the context of the conceptual framework of Bennett's (2017) ethno-centric and ethno-relative stages of increasing sensitivity to cultural differences. Five categories of description included: (a) failure to recognize the relevance of culturally different others; (b) recognizing biased and stereotyped views of other cultures; (c) minimizing cultural differences; (f) acceptance of cultural differences; and (e) adaptation to cultural differences.

**Category 1-Failure to Recognize the Relevance of Culturally Different Others:** Study participants discussed their perceptions about the importance of recognizing diversity in the classroom. They reflected on their own experiences with teachers who failed to become aware of the cultural richness among students and lacked the cultural sensitivity to relate to students' lived experiences, view reality from their cultural and historical lenses, and value the funds of knowledge they brought into the learning environment. This contributed to a failure to acknowledge or recognize the relevance of cultural diversity to teaching and student engagement in the learning process.

> *Growing up. . . . I learned quickly that the teachers teaching me had no clue what the community was all about. . . . I felt that they [teachers] could not relate to me or my family. The skills I grew up learning and thinking were valuable meant nothing to these predominantly Asian and Caucasian teachers. I feel that if the teachers better understood me and my fellow classmates that possibly more of us would have gone further in life knowing and being reassured that where we came from and the life skills we learned at home are what will make us successful in the world.* [P14]

> *Now the students might not share their culture with you, or they might try to deny their own culture, but the culture of their family does have an impact on them. The impact can be anywhere from attitudes towards school and education to religious/political beliefs; very helpful to know ahead of time when lesson planning.* [P45]

> *I am first generation Mexican American. Both of my parents were born and raised in Mexico and came to this country at around the ages of 20, met each other, fell in love and started a family. Growing up. . . I had plenty of friends that were like me, Mexican Americans, but there were many other students from different ethnic backgrounds. Thinking about my teachers, I can't recall any of them ever relating to my culture until I got into high school and I started taking Spanish courses.* [P57]

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**Category 1-Summary:** Descriptive category 1 represented perceptions about the failure of educators to recognize the relevance of culturally different others reflecting DMIS stage 1, denial of cultural differences. Perceptions centered on personal experiences with teachers who lacked awareness of cultural differences among students in their classroom or knowing those who attempted to deny or minimize their own cultural heritage. Lessons and activities lacked acknowledgement or incorporation of the cultural skills and knowledge students brought into the learning environment.

**Category 2-Recognizing Biased and Stereotyped Views of Other Cultures:** Participants shared perceptions about the need for teachers to become aware of the cultural biases and stereotyped beliefs that influences their curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom interactions. Perceptions reflected the lack of cultural sensitivity that drove the perpetuation of the dominant cultural social and power structures and muted the voices of minority cultures. Participants reflected on the need for personal efforts to be made to recognize these biases and work through them as they strengthen their level of intercultural sensitivity.

> *The curriculum, thus, privileges the teacher's cultural background and neglects the cultural capital of students, their families and their communities. This dynamic reinforces existing social power-structures and current stereotypes educators may have about students from diverse backgrounds and from the working classes.* [P43]

> *I must start with acknowledging my own biases. I will need to be aware of my own personal biases and understand how these will be displayed in my classroom. I will need to open my mind and my heart to the students so that I may begin to change my biases. I will need to be aware of my level of empathy and aware of the tone of my voice in behavioral situations. My own biases will also come from my lack of knowledge about the students and community I teach in.* [P32]

> *As an educator it is important to be culturally aware of the community in which one works, lives, and is accustomed to. This cultural awareness is essential to avoid bringing subconscious biases into the classroom. When educators are aware of underlying biases, they are able to facilitate learning for all students by creating effective, memorable lessons and ensure that students are able to make the most of each lesson.* [P26]

> *The project helped me shed some preconceived notions I had about my students based on their ethnicity and allowed me to get to know them through the lens of their neighborhood and their stories.* [57]

Participants shared perceptions that teachers hold biased and stereotyped views of other cultures and how they and their students bring into the classroom both conscious and subconscious biases and preconceived notions about other cultures. Teachers discussed the need to reflect on personal biases and assumption that influence their teaching and interactions and how this can affect student engagement and learning.

> *There are endless reasons for why educators should be culturally aware of the community in which they work, live, and are accustomed to. Being a culturally aware teacher is essential to avoid bringing subconscious biases into the classroom. When educators are aware of underlying biases, they are able to facilitate learning for all students by creating effective, memorable lessons.* [P26]

> *This assignment taught me the importance of knowing how I perceive the community in which I work as well as how the outside world views it. I need to set all subconscious biases aside in my classroom to help my students' reach their fullest potential.* [P26]

> *As teachers we must examine the cultural assumptions and stereotypes we bring into the classroom that may hinder interdependence. . . . In order to engage students effectively in the learning process, teachers must know their students and their academic abilities individually, rather than relying on racial or ethnic stereotypes or prior experience with other students of similar backgrounds.* P[56]

> *There is an issue of misunderstanding that seems to be permeating our school systems. There is an issue with teachers who are not aware of the cultural differences and life experiences of the students they teach. . . . As an outsider looking in, we make assumptions. We make assumptions about homelife, effort, need, and skill. As educators, we let these assumptions control the classroom. We let these assumptions dictate who we teach and how we teach. It is this cycle of unawareness that we need to change. It is this cycle of misunderstanding that needs to be broken. It has to start with me.* [P32]

**Category 2-Summary:** Descriptive category 2 represented perceptions about recognizing personal biases, assumptions, and stereotypes brought into the educational environment and the need for greater teacher awareness of the influences of these biases on instructional and learning processes. These perceptions reflected the DMIS ethnocentric stages 1, denial of cultural differences, and 3, minimizing cultural

differences, in terms of a lack of intercultural sensitivity among teachers who failed to acknowledge the diversity among cultures by emphasizing culture similarities and dismissing or minimizing differences.

**Category 3-Minimizing Cultural Differences:** Study participants discussed their experiences and perceptions about cultural diversity in terms of minimizing or denial of cultural differences. Participants recognized that it is easy to look for and focus on cultural similarities and ignore differences. Just because someone may share the same ethnicity does not necessarily mean they share the same cultural heritage and traditions. By giving attention to cultural similarities and ignoring differences, one can fall into the trap of communicating and acting from preconceived notions about one's culture relative to others.

> *Assuming that students of a similar background to my own would be like me was a mistake and the first problem with my assumption is ignoring some major differences to the place where I grew up . . . and the place where my students are living and growing up themselves.* [P57]

> *I went into my student teaching feeling like I was fairly sure what most of my student's backgrounds would be like because we shared a common factor in our demographics. I am Mexican American like the majority of my students, and to me that meant that we would have a lot in common. I was not completely wrong but I was more wrong than I thought I would be. I had to reset my preconceived notions about what my students would be like and start with a fresh slate.* [P57]

Participants perceived that it is important not to minimize or deny one's cultural heritage. Participants reflected on the importance of recognizing one's own culture and how some individuals deny their cultural heritage as a means of feeling a part of the dominant culture rather than embracing their cultural identity. It is important for teachers to help students acknowledge, value, and embrace their cultural heritage and traditions while also embracing their identity as Americans.

> *Becoming culturally informed includes knowing the difference between race and culture. In addition, some students do not identify with their cultural heritage and would rather identify as American.* [P30]

> *Being involved in the community. . . . The festival I attended taught me many things about my own Asian heritage as well as other Asian cultures of the South Pacific. One of the things I learned from speaking to some of the performers was that much of the Asian traditions have been lost in America because of parents pushing their children to assimilate the American Culture at the expense of their own.* [P45]

> *Although we need to be sensitive to students' self-image, most of us have a country of origin where there is a history of rich culture, family connections, and identity. Students can value their cultural heritage while also embracing their identity as Americans.* [P30]

Participants perceived that as educators, they have a responsibility to promote and help students develop intercultural sensitivity as part of their development. This can be facilitated by incorporating students' cultural knowledge into course curriculum to create culturally relevant lessons that promote intercultural sensitivity among the teacher and students. It is especially important for teachers of color to share their cultural backgrounds with students and to serve as an advocate to help students of color give voice to their cultural heritage and lived experiences.

> *Some students have lost touch with their cultural backgrounds, and consider themselves just Americans. Of course, we are all Americans, but we come from different cultural backgrounds and even different races. However, getting familiar with one's cultural roots helps one appreciate our heritage. Likewise, as we mature, we need to look beyond ourselves and people of diverse backgrounds. Getting along with others is one important key for success at school, in our community, and our world. Knowledge of our own culture is a great place to begin and gaining an understanding of the diversity of the students we teach is essential for culturally responsive education.* [P30]

> *Students' funds of knowledge also informed the classroom activities I used throughout the semester. It is important to incorporate students' culture into the classroom at every opportunity that presents itself.* [P3]

> *Teachers of color (non-White teachers) not only share the cultural backgrounds of their students but (a) hold students of color (non-White students) to a higher academic standard than White teachers and that students tend to meet these higher standards, (b) serve as cultural and linguistic translators for these students, (c) act as advocates for students who are silenced or invisible in school settings, and (d) intervene when racism and discrimination alienate or isolate students of color.* [P3]

**Category 3-Summary:** Descriptive category 3 represented perceptions about minimizing or denying cultural differences reflecting the DMIS ethnocentric stage 3, minimizing cultural differences, in terms of people's failure to give attention to culture differences and thus acting from preconceived notions about one's culture relative to others. There is a risk of people denying their cultural heritage as a means of feeling more part of the larger social identity of being "American." A dominant perception was the importance of giving attention to promoting intercultural sensitivity and competence both in themselves and their students.

**Category 4-Acceptance Of Cultural Differences:** Participants perceived cultures as complex and different with a cultural lens through which reality is experienced and values, beliefs, communication, and behaviors are shaped. Perceptions were discussed in terms of acceptance but not necessarily integration of cultural differences into one's sense of self. There is a curiosity about and respect for other cultures that promotes a desire to form cross-cultural relationships. Perceptions within this category were related to: (a) acknowledgement of cultural difference and other cultural world views; (b) appreciation and respect for cultural values, traditions, and worldviews; (c) curiosity and desire to learn about other cultures, (d) growth in cultural sensitivity and competence, and (e) desire to form cross-cultural relationships.

**4a. Acknowledgement of Cultural Differences and Other Cultural Worldviews:** Participants discussed their recognition that cultural differences exist and are as complex as one's own cultural heritage. Some perceived that even within their own ethnic group there are cultural differences. Acknowledging, appreciating, and incorporating these cultural differences would enrich students' learning by creating a culturally responsive classroom. Being an effective teacher involves being comfortable with one's own culture while also accepting the heritage, traditions, and worldviews of other cultures. This was perceived as a challenge of teaching in a diverse classroom.

> *The different identities and demographics of the elementary schools come together in a complex mosaic representing a vast spectrum of socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural diversity.* [P31]

> *I felt ready to go when I was assigned to start my student teaching. . . that has a population of 90 percent Hispanic students that I assumed were just like me. I was wrong.* [P57]

> *Nowadays more and more schools are becoming more culturally diverse and the need for educators to understand and embrace these students is a must. Educators need to embrace and appreciate all of the uniqueness that students bring on a daily basis and incorporate it into their classrooms.* [P23]

> *Teachers must be comfortable with their own backgrounds, help students to value their own culture, and be accepting of diversity. . . . This means that teachers will have to address the issues as they arise and also plan curriculum that will incorporate and embrace the diversity in our classroom. They will be expected to be knowledgeable about their students' cultural backgrounds.* [P30]

**4b. Appreciating and Respect Cultural Values, Traditions and Worldviews:** Participants discussed the importance of demonstrating in the classroom and foster among students appreciating and respecting cultural values, traditions, and worldviews. Recognition and inclusion of cultural lifestyles and challenges can help make lessons more engaging and relevant to students by providing a cultural point of reference that promotes active participation in the learning process.

> *Businesses and sole proprietors are thriving as they sell goods and services world-wide. Therefore, as educators, we must prepare students to embrace their own cultural backgrounds, while respecting and valuing others as well.* [P30]

> *Educators need to be comfortable and empathetic with the students they teach and model good attitudes towards diversity and social justice issues. . . . School districts that are culturally responsive will incorporate the issues of respect and understanding towards others across all subject areas. For example, in Art class, I can incorporate learning about artworks from a variety of cultures around the world, including Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Much of the traditional art curriculum includes mostly artwork by European artist from Italy, Spain, and Britain.* [P30]

> *Knowing the culture of the area surrounding the school and the resources that students can take advantage of can direct teachers in the kind of assignments they give. . . . Including some of the cultural references, lifestyles, challenges, and jokes into the pedagogy will make instruction culturally relevant and appropriate for the students and even foster more engagement from them.* [P1]

*Culturally relevant teaching is essential for us to be successful in today's educational environment. Many of our students who have difficulty engaging with course materials find themselves not involved with classroom discussions and activities. Developing cultural relevance in conjunction with the curriculum can create a learning environment in which students can flourish.* [P16]

*Educators should become familiar with how students learn at home and utilize those same learning styles and teaching tools in their classrooms. For example, if community members have a tradition of oral storytelling, it is important to incorporate this into the classroom.* [P6]

*I might have students pair up with a partner who comes from a different culture than them and have the pair do a collaborative project in which they learn about each other's lives. Then I could have all the groups set up a gallery walk in the community center that is located next door to the school and invite their family and friends to come and view each piece as if they were visiting a museum, since there are no museums within the vicinity of the city.* [P12]

**4c. Curiosity and Desire to Learn about Other Cultures:** Participants expressed a curiosity and desire to learn more about the cultural backgrounds and communities of their students and the importance of this knowledge to teaching in a diverse classroom. There was a curiosity and motivation to learn about the cultural lens that influences students' lives, beliefs, values and ways of behaving to better craft lessons and pedagogy to develop a deeper connection with students and students with the subject content.

*East Asian English learners frequent these two spots on a weekly basis because they feel most at home there. Knowing that my students feel a more personal connection to these places because they most resemble home compels me to not just drive by but to visit the places to learn more about my students' cultures and become more involved in the community.* [P10]

*The first step is to get to know the school community. Now by this I don't simply mean taking a stroll; you have to do some research. . . . to identify which cultures are present in your class and community. Culturally relevant lessons can be not only a powerful way to engage your students, but I think it will allow you to make a deeper connection with them because it shows that you know about their lives.* [P45]

*The setting of each individual student's upbringing gives teachers light on the cultural and community lifestyle of each student. . . . I believe that as teachers, we need to really become a part of our students' worlds because it allows us to see the person they are and not just the student they are. . . . Therefore, to know the identities of students, we must dig into their background, culture, family, circle of friends, interests, and whatever else makes up who they are.* [P39]

**4d. Growth in Intercultural Sensitivity and Competence:** There was a perception by participants of the importance of actively working to improve one's intercultural sensitivity and competence. Teachers can facilitate growth in intercultural sensitivity through reflection and actions that promote awareness, acknowledgement, and respect for diverse cultural viewpoints, communication styles and ways of behaving among them as well as among their students. This is an ongoing process. The challenge for teachers is to create culturally sensitive and responsive lessons and activities that engage students and meet their learning needs through culturally sensitive curriculum, lessons, and activities.

*Cultural awareness and culturally proficiency is very important. Teachers who develop a cultural awareness of their students, their school, and the community. . . not only become more knowledgeable of their school's surrounding community, they also learn valuable information to help them best serve the students that they teach.* [P1]

*Not only does it [creating culturally consistent curriculum] establish relevancy, but it lends value (via the educational establishment) to students' culture that they might not otherwise receive. . . . Teachers must actively seek out information about the community and the culture to be able to use it in classroom activities.* [P3]

*Every person has an upbringing which follows the traditions of their parents' heritage and culture. Taking the time to learn about and understand these cultures and traditions opens many new doors leading to new views and angles for approaching each of the subjects we teach. This brings to students a new level of understanding and opportunity for investigation of topics in a way we may not otherwise look at these subjects.* [P19]

*I can use cultural events from both communities as field trips and points of discussion in the classroom. I can use resources as a way for students to become more involved in their local community and find out for themselves what their communities have to offer.* [P36]

*Talking about culture is one thing, but actually bringing culture into the classroom in an appropriate manner will always be a challenge.* [P54]

*Culture is a lived experience unique to each individual, and to truly engage students, we must reach out to them in ways that are culturally and linguistically responsive and appropriate.* [P56]

*The incorporation of cultural pedagogy not only will enable me to better connect with my students but will also enable me to better understand my students' thoughts, cultures, customs, beliefs and traditions.* [P23]

Through reflection on one's own culture and lived experiences, educators can become more knowledgeable about their cultural influences as well as seek to learn about and understand the cultural influences of the students in their classroom. This process can help educators develop a deeper understanding of their cultural identity as well as help students develop their own cultural identities and understand and appreciate the different cultural heritage, traditions, and worldviews of others.

*Educators that regularly reflect upon their influences of cultural backgrounds will be better prepared to accommodate the needs of their specific student populations. In addition, by becoming knowledgeable about the cultures and diversity of their students, teachers can be leaders of a more just school setting for all students. Similarly, teachers who have an increase of self-awareness of their own identity will help students appreciate their own backgrounds. When students gain an appreciation for themselves, they can better understand that each individual feels strongly about their own backgrounds too. By modeling progressive attitudes towards ourselves, we can be more aware of being inclusive of others.* [P30]

*Where the students live, what they do after school, what they enjoy should all be on our minds as we create lessons to teach in our classrooms. If we are able to create these engaging, culturally responsive lessons for our students, classroom management issues will be little to none, and students will be engaged and excited to learn what you are trying to teach them.* [P51]

**4e. Desire to Form Cross-Cultural Relationships:** Participants believed that creating a culturally relevant classroom and cross-cultural relationships is fostered in a classroom that values and respects cultural traditions and worldviews. The development of cross-cultural relationships begins with teachers examining their curriculum and pedagogy to determine where changes can increase the level of cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and cultural relevance for students. Tying curriculum to the lived experiences of students in relation to their community culture, history, and tradition can build connections with the course material and facilitate engagement in the learning process.

*This starts with examining the curriculum, which should be culturally relevant. Teachers should look for opportunities to positively depict various cultures, values, and experiences of students in the class.* [P6]

*Using the community center as a space for the students to show their cultural museum pieces would be an excellent way for me to make those strategic connections with the staff at the center and show them how committed both my students and I are to bringing cultural awareness to the community.* [P12]

*It has been my goal as a teacher to connect my instruction in the classroom with students' culture in the community, at home, and within their own lives. While keeping the community they teach in mind, teachers are capable of connecting students with relevant learning that they will gain more out of.* [P34]

*Being culturally responsive means to know how to really build a community between the different students within the classroom by understanding the students' identities.* [P39]

*An integral part of planning meaningful and engaging lessons is to help students realize that they are not only here to learn from me, but I am here to learn from them and about them while they learn from and about each other as well. Incorporating their cultural knowledge and viewpoint into the classroom will help them understand that the more that they know about different cultures and the more they realize how much they have to offer each other and their community, the students will start to see those connections between school and the world around them, which will help to make them into well rounded critical thinkers who can use that knowledge for good and for change.* [P12]

*As an educator, I can use the information regarding culture and the community to create deeper conversations and dialogue among students.* [P42]

Participants believed that within diverse classrooms, some teachers may face challenges in connecting with students because of a lack of cultural competence and an inability to recognize aspects of different cultures. This cultural bias or minimization of cultural differences can contribute to the inability to modify the

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curriculum and pedagogy to create more engaging and relevant lessons that facilitate cross-cultural relationships. Forming cross-cultural relationships promote a more culturally responsive learning environment for students that make learning more relevant and meaningful. Creating more culturally responsive classrooms is a collaborative process that involves the school district, community members, parents, teachers, and students working together to promote intercultural understanding and cross-cultural relationships through curriculum and instructional techniques that makes the subject content more relevant to students.

> *Most teachers cannot relate to their students because of the disconnection found in the way teachers tend to word lessons, the way they speak, and the way they address and deal with issues.* [P23]

> *It is very simple to just facilitate the information that we plan out with our department teams, but it is much more gratifying and rewarding to present information in a way that is culturally, socially, and emotionally relevant to the students. Students are looking for that sense of connection and relation with the content. It is important that we give that to them; otherwise, we are validating the notion that all the information and content we give them will serve no importance beyond our classroom.* [P24]

> *In order for pre-service teachers to seek understanding in their own culture, underlying biases, and the cultures of school organizations, local and district they need to have a collaborative classroom. A collaborative classroom is shared knowledge among teachers and students but can also be shared knowledge between teachers and staff or teachers and the community. Collaborative teachers value and build upon the knowledge, personal experiences, language, strategies, and culture that students bring to the learning situation. This same experience occurs when the knowledge parents and other community members have is valued and used within the school.* [P56]

> *However just having a cultural connection is not enough to create a culturally responsive classroom. I have seen time and again classrooms that have relatable cultural connectors but do not apply them to their students' lives.* [P37]

**Category 4 Summary:** Descriptive category 4 represented perceptions about accepting, appreciating, honoring, and respecting cultural differences. These perceptions reflected the DMIS ethno-relative stage 4, accepting cultural differences, in terms of having a curiosity to learn about other cultures and acknowledging that people come from different cultural lenses for interpreting reality. Dominant perceptions included being comfortable in one's own culture while also accepting, valuing, and respecting the heritage, traditions, and worldviews of other cultures. This was important to participants as the foundation for creating a classroom environment that is more engaging and relevant to students and promotes active participation in the learning process. Another dominant perception was the belief that actively working to improve one's intercultural sensitivity and competence was integral to creating a culturally responsive teaching and learning environment through the development of culturally sensitive curriculum, lessons, and activities. Understanding one's cultural influences and working to understand the cultural influences of student can help teacher gain a deeper understanding of their students' cultural identities and worldviews. Finally, participants believed that key to promoting cross-cultural relationships is through valuing and respecting the diversity of cultural traditions and worldviews. It is critical to use curriculum and instructional techniques to facilitate intercultural sensitivity to the lived experiences of students and using this knowledge to form cross-cultural relationships and build connections with the course material to make it more relevant and meaningful for students.

**Category 5-Adaptation to Cultural Differences:** Participants perceived that to engage students in the classroom, it is important for teachers to expand their knowledge about cultural differences to form and strengthen cross-cultural relationships. Participants believed that students bring into the classroom different cultural heritages, lived experiences, and lens for seeing the world. Through the curriculum and pedagogy, teachers can tap into these different cultures to promote an expanded their worldview and celebrate the richness that different cultures bring to the social landscape.

> *In today's American society, many cultures come together to form the societal landscape of our everyday lives. Each member of this landscape brings a background from home and country. . . . Understanding the character traits that make up each of these young people, and the characteristics that create their world view, provides a vast canvas on which to paint the picture of a lesson from a different angle than that presented in the text book.* [P19]

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*In order to create a more comprehensive classroom, we must first look to the knowledge the students bring to the table. Each and every one of the students we serve comes to our classroom with a set of experiences and an upbringing. Many of them have families who are from different parts of the country and even the world. They have different cultural experiences and preferences as well as different religious beliefs.* [P38]

*I engage students in conversations about culture, their home lives, and socio-political consciousness. I also encourage students to propose ideas for projects and create opportunities for peer teaching.* [P6]

*Multiple ways of knowing, experiencing, and understanding life can help students to find and value their own voices, histories, and cultures. By incorporating culture and academic performance this can lead to a culturally responsive pedagogy.* [P56]

**Category 5-Summary:** Descriptive category 5 represented perceptions about adapting to cultural differences. These perceptions reflected the DMIS ethno-relative stage 5, adaptation to cultural differences, in terms of expanding one's knowledge about the history, traditions, and ways of communicating across different cultures as a means of forming new and strengthening existing cross-cultural relationships. Tapping into these different cultural lenses and ways of acting in the world can promote a richer and more expansive way of viewing reality and finding meaning in the course material.

**Results-Summary:** Participant perceptions reflected beliefs that there exists within society and the educational system a lack of awareness and acknowledgement of the importance of understanding the influence of cultural differences on curriculum and pedagogical approaches that affect student engagement and learning within the classroom. The first three categories of description aligned with Bennet's ethno-centric stages of intercultural sensitivity that there is a denial or minimizing of cultural differences and a propensity for evaluating and interacting within different cultural contexts using one's own culture-specific set of standards, values, and ways of behaving (Bennett, 1998, 2017). The last two categories of description aligned with Bennet's (2017) ethno-relative stages of acceptance and adaptation to cultural differences. Participant perceptions reflected beliefs that developing intercultural sensitivity and forming cross-cultural relationships involves expanding one's world view to include the understanding that students bring into the classroom different cultural lenses from which they view their reality and interpret their experiences. Learning becomes more relevant and meaningful when teachers are able to communicate and act in a way with students, which is culturally congruent.

## Discussion

The findings of the present study add to the body of knowledge from which educators and school leaders can draw upon in developing and implementing culturally responsive and inclusive curricula and pedagogy that acknowledges and respects the different cultural lenses students bring into the instructional and learning environment. The level of culturally responsive curricula, materials, and instructional techniques vary widely across the U.S. There remains a lack of awareness among school leaders and policy makers in the ways school policies and procedures inhibit the implementation of course curricula and instructional strategies that promote more culturally responsive teaching. Increased cultural awareness and growth in intercultural sensitivity can weaken the embedded dominant Euro-centric Western cultural influence on school educational structures and allow for the inclusion of a more multicultural approach to teaching and learning. In a multi-cultural society, teachers and educational leaders must work to foster intercultural sensitivity and cultural competence within the educational system and culturally diverse classroom environment.

While perceptions of pre-service teachers in the study were varied in terms of intercultural sensitivity, a common perception was that cultural awareness and acceptance were central to adapting course curricula and pedagogy based on insight about students' cultural backgrounds. Study participants recognized that school leaders and teachers continue to deal with heavily influenced Euro-centric western cultural-based curriculum and instructional techniques that fail to take into account cultural diversity in the classroom. Pre-service teachers in the study underscored the importance of teaching a culturally diverse and relevant curriculum that acknowledges the totality of students' lived experiences brought into the classroom that influence their interest and engagement in the learning process (Gay, 2018). Unfortunately, in line with Bennett (2017), there are teachers, educational leaders, and staff support personnel who deny, minimalize, and fail to recognize and acknowledge cultural differences or the significant role that multi-culturalism takes in the learning process for students. Teachers at the ethno-centric stages of intercultural sensitivity are prone to

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reinforce their cultural lens for interpreting reality and deny or minimize other cultural worldviews of their students (Bennett, 2017).

Educational leaders and teachers' ability to acknowledge, accept, and honor cultural diversity and the legitimacy of the lived experiences of their students is critical to internal systemic change in curricular and pedagogy strategies that move away from a reliance on the Euro-centric Western culture toward greater inclusion of non-dominant cultural viewpoints and contributions. It takes a concerted effort among educational leaders, teachers, parents, students and community members to create and sustain new spaces for dialogue, actions and substantive changes toward a culturally inclusive education environment.

Educators often serve as liaisons between students and the community. Participants perceived that teachers' awareness of the personal cultural backgrounds and biases they and their students bring into the classroom and instruction/learning process can influence cross-cultural interactions with students, parents, and community members. Therefore, building cultural and historical awareness about the community in which students live is important to expanding one's awareness of different cultural landscapes represented in the classroom. This awareness can be used to bridge the gap between the community in which students live and the classroom where they engage in learning. Through cultural competency training, educational leaders, teachers, and school staff are provided with the knowledge and skill to actively communicate and model beliefs, values, and action that promote an ethno-relative level of intercultural sensitivity that allows for deeper intercultural relationships and interactions with those of different cultures in the classroom and the community.

Teacher preparation courses that provide opportunities for students to explore their own cultural viewpoint and reflect on the cultural biases, assumptions, and stereotypes they might bring into their teaching and interaction with students is a critical step toward becoming more culturally responsive educators (Gay, 2018). Professional development courses with a focus on cultural competence can provide teachers in ethno-centric stages of intercultural sensitivity opportunities for critical reflection, knowledge attainment, and discourse to facilitate movement toward more ethno-relative stages. Movement toward acknowledgement and acceptance of cultural differences are important steps toward effective intercultural communication and interaction in cross-cultural situations (Bennett, 2017).

## Conclusion

In 2023, tensions are high in the U.S. and there is conflict over issues of multi-culturalism and adapting curricula and pedagogical approaches to include subject content, lessons, and activities from different cultural worldviews. Educational leaders and educators are still confronted with a powerful wall of resistance to acknowledge and accepting cultural diversity. There are going efforts to restrict the inclusion of culturally relevant and responsive curricula and instructional materials in the classroom through structures and policies that impose significant sanctions to those who include minority cultural content in the formal course curricula. The inclusion of pre-service teacher preparation courses that recognize and celebrate the lived experiences of all students regardless of cultural background can move the U.S. educational system toward a more culturally aware and inclusive teaching curricula and pedagogy. Failure to do so will limit new spaces for the creation of a culturally inclusive and equitable learning environment and educational process for a culturally diverse student population.

Overall, the results of the present study support prior research findings that increased attention given to adapting curriculum and pedagogy in the classroom has promoted a more engaging and relevant instructional and learning environment for students (Gay 2018; Romijn et al., 2021). Growth in intercultural sensitivity and cultural competence requires proactive measures to support the change process within school systems to foster a more culturally aware, accepting, and inclusive school climate (Gay, 2018). Through intercultural sensitivity and cultural competence training, educators can gain insight into how both personal and institutional structures sustain cultural biases and stereotypes within the curriculum and pedagogy that disenfranchises students and inhibit learning processes (Bennett, 2017; Gay, 2018). However, there is still pushback against changes to the curricula and pedagogy in school districts through the implementation of policies and practices that limit cultural competence training and the inclusion of culturally diverse course materials and instructional strategies.

While progress of change can be slow, there remains a strong commitment within the educational community to promote an intercultural approach to teaching and to confront those policies and practice that work to deny multiculturalism and sustain the Euro-centric Western culture that drives curricular and pedagogical approaches used in the classroom. Significant work remains ahead to achieve transformative and permanent change in the existing school culture, formal practices, and actions of school personnel, students, parents, and the community that denies or downplays the importance of culturally diversity and culturally responsive teaching. As long as the Euro-centric Western culture dominates the U.S. school system, students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds will continue to face an exclusionary instructional environment that can create barriers to learning and academic success.

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