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Dagoberto Eli Ramirez
Betto.ramirez@gmail.com

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Towards Implementing Culturally Relevant Curriculum: How 17 Words Inspired Research

Dagoberto Eli Ramírez

Texas districts approved Texas Association of School Boards' Update 93 in spring 2012. The policy update calls for use of culturally relevant materials in school districts' implementation of their instructional programs. The policy uses seventeen words to describe resources necessary to deliver, support, enrich, and assist in implementing the district's educational program: materials that "represent many ethnic, religious, and cultural groups and their contributions to the national heritage and world community." Using a qualitative case study approach in a Texas district, this University of Texas-Pan American Educational Leadership Doctorate Degree research project investigates how and to what degree educational leadership shapes implementation of Update 93's culturally relevant curriculum policy. Via semi-structured interviews with personnel – superintendent, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, principals, and teachers – the study is uncovering how educational leaders' personal stories and values drive this seventeen-word policy implementation.

This study investigated how and to what degree educational leadership shapes the implementation of policy that dictates culturally relevant social studies curriculum in a Texas school district. Furthermore, the project investigated the following three aspects about the district in South Texas: 1) how having a mandated district-level policy implementing a culturally relevant social studies curriculum manifests itself at the school and classroom levels; 2) how the implementation of policy of cultural relevance in curriculum is shaped by school leadership; and, 3) how the policy of cultural relevance in curriculum translates into classroom practice.

In the winter and spring of 2012, school boards in Texas school districts approved the Texas Association of School Boards' four-page *Update 93, EFA(LOCAL)-A policy* (Texas Association of School Boards). This policy, among other things, mandated the use of instructional resources and materials that present varying levels of difficulty, diversity of appeal, and a variety of points of view, with the stated purpose of delivering, supporting, enriching, and assisting the implementation of the school district's educational program. Objective number four of five in the *Update 93, EFA(LOCAL)-A policy* specifically states that

the local school board shall rely on the school district professional staff to select and acquire instructional resources that “represent many ethnic, religious, and cultural groups and their contributions to the national heritage and world community” (Texas Association of School Boards). It is therefore clear Texas school boards in the winter and spring of 2012 intentionally approved policy that mandates culturally relevant instructional resources and instructional materials be used in classrooms in their school districts to study the “many ethnic, religious, and cultural groups and their contributions to the national heritage and world community.” Because the study of “ethnic, religious, and cultural groups and their contributions to the national heritage and world community” most naturally occurs in social studies classrooms, it should be expected that the implementation of *Update 93, EFA(LOCAL)-A policy* should be occurring via a culturally relevant curriculum in social studies classrooms in Texas schools and districts. The purpose of the study is to explore how and to what degree educational leadership shapes the implementation of policy that dictates culturally relevant social studies curriculum in a Texas school.

The overarching research question was: how and to what degree does educational leadership shape the implementation of policy that dictates culturally relevant social studies curriculum in school districts in Texas? The research sub-questions were:

1. How does having a mandated district-level policy implementing a culturally relevant social studies curriculum manifest itself at the school and classroom levels?
2. How does school leadership shape the policy of cultural relevance in curriculum?
3. How does the policy of cultural relevance in curriculum translate into classroom practice?

This research study used qualitative methodology, with a case study approach (Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*; Denzin and Lincoln; Erickson; Gay and Airasian). Creswell (*Educational Research*) stated that a case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection; the term “bounded” referred to the fact that the case is separated out for research in time, place, or some physical barriers (Creswell, *Educational Research*). Data was collected from district and school leaders (whose responsibilities include implementing decisions about Social Studies curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices) and classroom teachers from one district in Texas. The data gathered from individual interviews at the multiple sites generated the basis for case description and case themes to emerge (Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*). A case study approach was appropriate in studying the research problem previously identified in the introduction because the research study had a clearly identifiable case with boundaries and aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*).

The research study was framed through the lens of a framework, which I developed using the combination of two previously developed and published theoretical models. The first model is the Guajardo, Guajardo, Oliver, Valadez, Keawe, Henderson, and Rocha “ecologies of knowing” model, which has three levels: the *self*, the *organization*, and the *community*. The second model is derived from the works of both Trueba and Mehan, in which the authors discuss the *technical*, the *political*, and the *cultural* leadership skills that are necessary in curriculum development and implementation as well as in organizational change and reform. This framework, the Knowing to Lead (KL) Model, was developed by intersecting the levels (*self*, *organization*, and *community*) of the former model with the skills (*technical*, *political*, and *cultural*) of the latter model. The KL Model was then used as an organizing and analysis tool with which to organize and subsequently analyze the data I gathered in this research study.

Figure 1 depicts the KL Model's resulting nine paired-combinations when each of the three ecologies of knowing (*self*, *organization*, and *community*) is paired with each of the leadership skills (*technical*, *political*, and *cultural*). This study used the KL Model in investigating how educational leadership shapes decisions about implementing policy that dictates culturally relevant social studies curriculum in school districts in Texas.

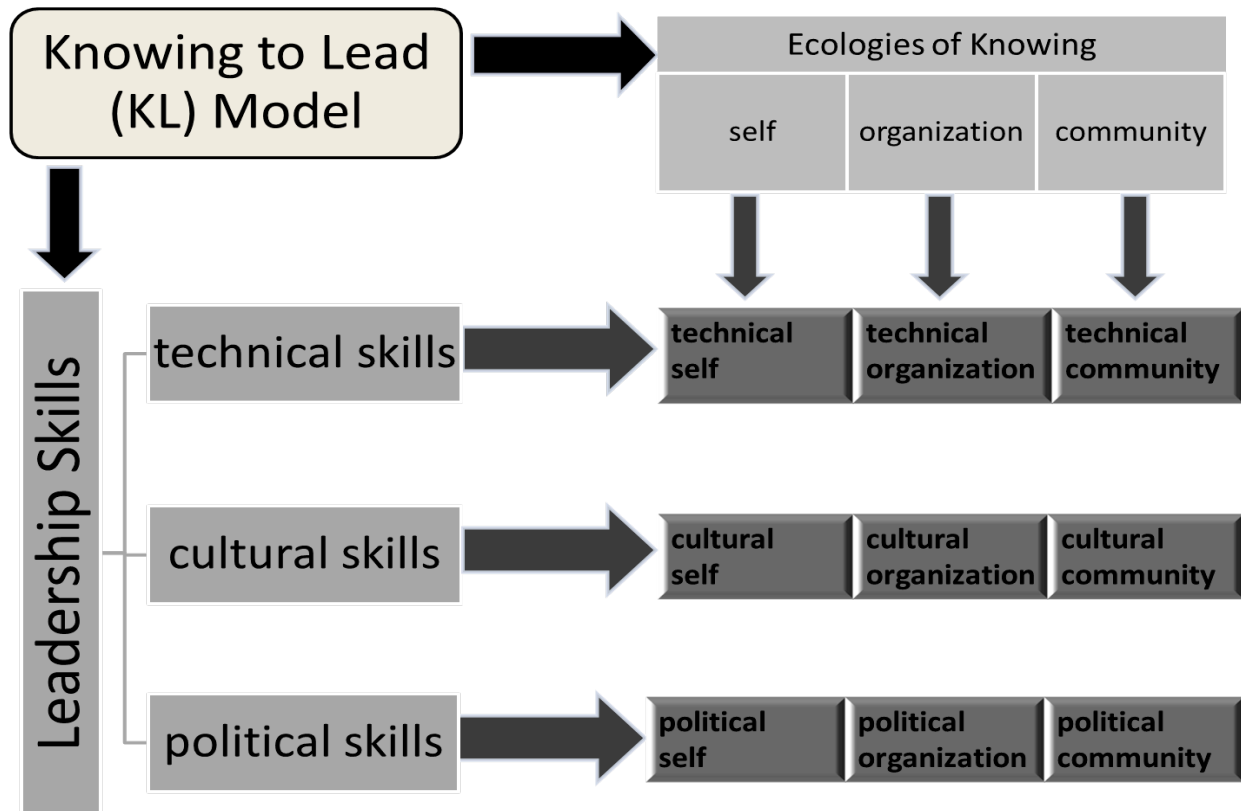


Figure 1. The Knowing to Lead (KL) Model

The KL Model was used to organize and analyze the qualitative research data that the one-on-one qualitative interview transcripts yielded. The first components that the KL Model used were the Guajardo et al. "ecologies of knowing" model's three levels of knowing: the *self*, the *organization*, and the *community*. Guajardo et al. explained that interactions occur at these three levels to organize conversations, identify entry points, and find spaces for interventions;

these ecologies of knowing start at the most intimate, inner part, the *self*, and then naturally flow out toward the immediate *organization* and subsequently the larger *community*, in a three-ringed concentric circle formation. At the *self* level of knowing, conversations and experiences are made personal and relevant at the most micro of levels, as this level is an opportunity for the individual to own their learning and their teaching through story telling (Guajardo et al.). Guajardo et al. detailed how, through story telling, every participant becomes owner of their learning and teaching by making this process personal, as it reframes the learning of the self and the collective and helps participants develop the necessary agency to act on their knowledge. At the *organization* level, this pace allows the learning to be couched within participants, families, schools, non-profit organizations and/or their neighborhoods (Guajardo et al.). The authors remind us that at the *organization* level the environment for learning is a critical element to explore and discuss, for it is within this social context that we develop our values, habits, and views of the world, further stating that the *self* within the *organization* is a critical unit for analysis (Guajardo et al.). At the third level, the *community* is critically important in mapping the learning. The *community's* economy, educational systems, housing, other elements of its infrastructure, and investment in its future are critical to account for when making sense of the learning and reconstruction of our story (Guajardo et al.). Guajardo et al. stated that as participatory members of the *community*, we must learn the skills, build the awareness, and plan the actions to change the behaviors and narratives from an outdated political practice grounded and informed by a zero-sum concept, to a new politic informed by caring and sustaining the quality of life for every child and citizen in our communities. These three levels of knowing that encompass the Guajardo et al. "ecologies of knowing" model, the *self*, the *organization*, and the *community*, comprise one aspect of the Knowing to Lead (KL) Model.

The other intersecting component of the Knowing to Lead (KL) Model is comprised of the *technical*, the *political*, and the *cultural* leadership skills necessary in curriculum development and implementation, as well as in organizational change and reform that Trueba and Mehan discuss. Mehan explained *technical* leadership skills focus on supporting the development of new knowledge and skills and are used to add new resources, including such assets as equipment and curriculum. Leading with *political* skills involves working to build productive relationships and galvanizing important political constituencies (Mehan). Mehan further shared that *cultural* leadership skills help engage an educator's values, belief systems, and norms, often about controversial topics (i.e., placement of teachers, the nature of intelligence and its distribution across race, ethnicity, class, and gender, as well as school sorting or testing practices). Trueba addresses the *technical*, the *political*, and the *cultural* leadership skills as well. The author begins by stating that traditionally the art and science of teaching (students in general but more specifically Hispanic/Latino students) has focused on using methodological and mechanistic tools – *technical* skills – completely dislodged and divorced from the sociocultural and historical circumstances of students' families and community (Trueba). Trueba describes this *technical* skills approach to teaching as the positivistic tradition in education, which understands teaching as a precise scientific undertaking and that views teachers as *technicians* who implement predetermined and preselected skills and strategies. The author further adds that these *technical* solutions assume that schools and teaching are *politically* neutral, ascribing responsibility of any necessary changes to students and their families and therefore not the schools, teachers, and the educational system in general (Trueba). These erroneous assumptions, Trueba believes, freed teachers from critically analyzing exemplary and effective teaching approaches and pushed them towards the act of simply grabbing and latching onto *technical* solutions. Trueba asserts that educators and educational leaders needed to steer away

from incorrect apolitical assumptions of educational reality and venture steadfastly toward the due critical assessment of the learning environments in their appropriate *political* contexts. The author adds that the challenge was to inculcate in educators a sophisticated understanding of the *political* nature of such environments (Trueba). Trueba then connects to the *cultural* skills in educational leadership by explaining that educational institutions in many ways mirrored the greater society in which those institutions existed, including our *culture*, values, and norms. He challenges educators to consider addressing the larger society's issues of asymmetrical power relationships among the various social and *cultural* strata which if not intentionally addressed in the classroom would replicate themselves there as well (Trueba). Trueba thus contended that *technical* expertise and mastery of content and methodology were insufficient to ensure reflective and effective instruction and that it is only with *political* clarity that educators could then create, adapt, and reform teaching strategies and methodologies to actively engage children in the learning process while at the same time respecting their *cultural* capital and challenging them.

The Knowing to Lead (KL) Model is a cross-pollination result of the intersection of the components, levels, and theoretical underpinnings of both the "ecologies of knowing" (Guajardo et al.) and the leadership skills (Mehan; Trueba) previously discussed. In developing the theoretical framework, I contend that the KL Model serves as a dual-dimension organizing and analysis tool that can be used to organize and analyze my qualitative case study's one-on-one interview transcripts and experience. I further contend that the cross-pollination process occurs by overlaying a specific and unique leadership skill (Mehan; Trueba) onto a specific and unique "ecology of knowing" level (Guajardo et al.) which then helps create a specific and unique "knowing to lead" framework component. When the three specific and unique leadership skills (Mehan; Trueba) were intersected or combined with the three specific and unique

“ecology of knowing” levels (Guajardo et al.), the results were nine specific and unique dual-dimension “knowing to lead” framework components. For example, overlaying or intersecting Mehan’s and Trueba’s *technical* skill onto Guajardo et al.’s *self* level “ecology of knowing” produces the dual-dimension *technical self* Knowing to Lead (KL) Model organizing and analyzing “knowing to lead” component. Thus, overlaying or intersecting Mehan’s and Trueba’s three specific and unique leadership skills onto Guajardo et al.’s three specific and unique “ecology of knowing” levels produces the following nine specific and unique dual-dimension Knowing to Lead (KL) Model organizing and analyzing “knowing to lead” components: 1) technical self; 2) political self; 3) cultural self; 4) technical organization; 5) political organization; 6) cultural organization; 7) technical community; 8) political community; and 9) cultural community. *Figure 2* lists each of the nine Knowing to Lead (KL) Model organizing and analyzing “knowing to lead” components along with a short, succinct definition of each component.

Knowing to Lead (KL) Component	Definition
technical self	leader uses technical skills within personal space; combines human aspect of the self with the mechanical aspect of the technical realm
political self	leader uses positive agency within; leader operates affectively and cognitively in constructive and productive way; all is well within relationship-wise
cultural self	leader develops values, beliefs, and norms at the self level; sets leader's moral trajectory; ethical compass within the leader
technical organization	leader uses technical skills at the organization level; technical leadership at organization level often contingent on shared, collective technical abilities and wills from other leaders and organizations
political organization	leader uses relationships to negotiate space to lead the organization; leader uses politics to harness human and non-human resources with which to lead; uses and grows professional and personal relationships
cultural organization	leader helps develop values, beliefs, and norms at the organization level; leader moves outside the moral and ethical self to influence the organization's culture
technical community	leader uses technical skills at the community level to solve community problems and address community issues
political community	leader uses relationships to help build community; leader harnesses human and non-human resources to negotiate political space at community level
cultural community	leader develops values, beliefs, and norms at the community level; leader moves beyond the moral and ethical self and organization level to influence the community's culture

Figure 2. Knowing to Lead (KL) Model components and definitions

The school district site and its corresponding middle school and high school level leadership participants and classroom teachers were selected from the area located along the borderlands adjacent to Mexico along the Rio Grande River in South Texas, in a regional area known as the Rio Grande Valley. The site was chosen based on the gender and years of experience of the superintendent, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, the two principals, and the four teachers who participated in the research.

The first selection criterion was the gender of the superintendent for the district; the district had a male superintendent. Once the participating district was selected based on the male gender of the superintendent, the next selection criterion was the gender of the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction; the district had a female assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. The next selection criteria were the gender and years of experience of the principals at the district. The district had one female high school principal with less than five years of experience and a male middle school principal with six years or more of experience. The last selection criteria for participants were the gender and years of experience of the participating teachers. The high school had one male teacher with less than five years of experience, and a female teacher with six years or more of experience. The district middle school had one male teacher with six years or more of experience, and a female teacher with less than five years of experience. These criteria (job descriptions, years of experience, and gender) were used so the study would have a spectrum of participants from different job descriptions, years of experience and gender combinations.

The purposeful sampling (Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*) criteria for the selection of the participant school district was based on those who have responsibilities for making and implementing decisions about social studies curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. The most accessible (Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*) cases from the eligible participants at all districts and campuses were the ones selected by the researcher to participate in the research study. Criteria set were used to select the participating district, and its corresponding superintendent, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, principals, and teachers.

Anonymity was created for the study's participants by implementing a process where actual names of individuals, people, places, and other things associated with the research study

(including the sites and participants) would be replaced by pseudonyms. The following list provides the initial pseudonyms for the district, schools, and participants associated with the research study's site and participant selection, which subsequently appears throughout the study:

La Frontera ISD was used as the name for the Rio Grande Valley independent school district where the research study was conducted; Dr. Alvaro Arnaldo was used as the name for the male superintendent of schools; Bianca Benitez was the name used for the female assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction; Tuco Benedicto High School was used as the name for the high school where the research study was conducted; Candi Cardenas was used as the name for the female high school principal; Diego Duarte was used as the name for the male high school teacher; Eliana Enriquez was used as the name for the female high school teacher; Los Veteranos Middle School was used as the name for the middle school where the research study was conducted; Fortunato Franco is the name that was used for the male middle school principal; Gracielo Gonzalez was used as the name for the male middle school teacher; and, Herlinda Hernandez was used as the name for the female middle school teacher.

I made every effort to assure that no real names were used in the process of writing the dissertation. If any of the pseudonyms I used bear any resemblance to real names of actual people, living or dead, such an occurrence is purely coincidental. Additional pseudonyms and brief descriptions were provided as specific individuals, people, places, and other things associated with the research study emerged in the dissertation process.

The data collection process at La Frontera ISD consisted of one-on-one semi-structured qualitative interviews. Creswell (*Educational Research*) shared that in qualitative research, the researcher asks open-ended questions so that participants can best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or by past research findings. Creswell

(*Educational Research*) clarified that the one-on-one interview is a data collection process in which the researcher asks questions to and records answers from only one participant in the study at a time. He further added that one-on-one interviews are ideal for interviewing participants who are not hesitant to speak, who are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably (Creswell, *Educational Research*). I found that Dr. Arnaldo the district superintendent, Ms. Bianca Benitez the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, the principals Ms. Cardenas and Mr. Franco, and the classroom teachers Mr. Duarte, Ms. Enriquez, Mr. Gonzalez, and Ms. Hernandez were unhesitant, articulate, and comfortable interviewees in the one-on-one interview setting in which they each participated.

Interview protocols were established and employed for the one-on-one interviews. These instruments were used because their designs appropriately matched the purpose of the qualitative method of case study the researcher used. Interviews facilitate the researcher in reaching areas of reality otherwise inaccessible, such as people's experiences and attitudes (Denzin and Lincoln). The interview also serves as a convenient method of overcoming space and time (Denzin and Lincoln). Additionally, past events and faraway experiences can be studied by interviewing participants who partook in them (Denzin and Lincoln). When conducting the one-on-one interviews with all participants, the researcher made annotated, detailed field notes using the five senses, paying attention to what was said, as well as how it was said. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with participants involved in the study. The instruments used in the one-one-one interviews included exploratory, investigative open-ended questions that helped elicit details about issues, assumptions, and beliefs associated with making and implementing decisions about culturally relevant social studies curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices at the district, campus, and classroom levels.

In order to create consistency in conducting the one-on-one interviews, I developed a set of interview protocols that were employed in conducting all the one-on-one interviews. Four separate interview protocols were established based on the job position the participant held: a first protocol was developed for the superintendent of schools; a second protocol was developed for the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction and instruction; a third protocol was developed for the principals; and, a fourth protocol was developed for the teachers. To establish the consistency between and among the four separate interview protocols for research study participants from the four separate and distinct job positions (superintendent, assistant superintendent, principals, and teachers), the researcher took care to ensure that the topics, themes, and foci that were explored via the interview protocols were common to all four protocols. Each of the following topics, themes, and foci were explored in all four separate protocols that were used to interview the superintendent, assistant superintendent, principal, and teacher participants: 1) participant personal and educational background; 2) participant understanding and perception of *culturally relevant curriculum*; 3) *curriculum policy* conversations participant has had with people above and below her/him in the district's organizational chart; 4) conversations about *culturally relevant curriculum* participant has had with people above and below her/him in the district's organizational chart and with students, parents, and community members; and, 5) participant understanding and perception of the research study's specific *culturally relevant curriculum* policy focus, the seventeen words – implementing the district's educational program by using resources that “*represent many ethnic, religious, and cultural groups and their contributions to the national heritage and world community.*” While the researcher allowed each one-on-one interview to proceed in an organic fashion and with its own natural flow within the established interview protocol, the researcher used the framework and structure of the protocol itself as a set of parameters to guide the framing of the

interview process. This allowed for an important combination of consistent, common topics, themes, and foci to be explored and rich details to emerge.

At the time of the presentation of this session at the National Association of Chicano and Chicana Studies (NACCS) Tejas 2013 Conference at the University of Texas-Pan American in late February 2013, I was concluding his data analysis in order to then begin the development of findings and recommendations. At the NACCS presentation, members of the audience asked me to identify some of the possible findings the data was surfacing. I unofficially shared some of the general concerns identified by the teachers who were interviewed, especially in reference to the official district-adopted and campus-implemented curriculum at La Frontera ISD. This generated a lively discussion at the NACCS session, and ultimately, this very topic – the official curriculum – *did* find its way into several key findings and recommendations when the dissertation was finalized and successfully defended on March 25, 2013. Appropriately, those findings and recommendations will be published subsequently.

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