



Writing autobiography to develop Culturally Responsive Competency: Teachers' intersections of personal histories, cultural backgrounds and biases



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated elementary school teachers' and pre-service teachers' autobiographies for developing *Culturally Responsive Competency* (CRC). The study's purpose was to engage participants in reflecting about their personal histories, cultural backgrounds and biases; making connections with the impact these have on interactions with culturally diverse students, and CRC. The data consisted of written autobiographies, excerpt read-alouds and a semi-structured interview. The findings indicated that teachers' writing, sharing and reflecting on their autobiographies was an effective strategy to develop CRC, which teachers would transfer into their classrooms. Conclusions highlighted positive implications for teachers' CRC and awareness of transcultural classroom dynamics; teacher educators' responsibility in developing and modeling CRC; and the need for further research on specific strategies in this field.

1. Introduction

This study investigated autobiography as a strategy to support the development of *Culturally Responsive Competency* (CRC) in elementary school teachers and pre-service teachers in the United States. The study's objectives included: 1) engaging teachers in reflecting about the intersections of their personal histories, cultural backgrounds and cultural biases; and 2) prompting teachers' insights about how these intersections impacted their classroom interactions, in particular with students from cultural backgrounds different than their own.

1.1. Cultural Responsive Pedagogy

Cultural Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is a teaching paradigm aligned with educational social justice principles. It aims at teaching to and through the personal and cultural strengths of marginalized groups, by capitalizing on students' intellectual abilities and cultural strengths (Gay, 2002). In 2010, Gay revisited the concept to focus on teachers' knowledge about students' sociocultural realities, personal and community histories, and knowing how to incorporate them into their curriculum and teaching.

While Ladson-Billings' (1994) theory of *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* closely relates to theories of CRP, this study used Gay's (2010) framework, as it directly aligns with understanding teachers' transcultural dynamics and their effects on education.

CRP acknowledges the multiple layers of culture and intersectionality issues therein; however, in the United States it focuses on race, ethnicity and socio-economic status; specifically on African-Americans, Hispanics and groups living in vulnerable socio-economic environments (Nieto, 2013; Young, 2010).

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1.2. Context

The juxtaposition of data from the [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(2017\)](#) and the [National Center for Education Statistics \(2016\)](#), both important branches of the U.S. Department of Education, indicate a clear pattern dating back to 1964: There is a persistent and systematic achievement gap between K-12 students determined by the intersection of race/ethnicity and socio-economic status. Middle-class White students significantly outperform their African-American and Hispanic peers living in poverty in reading and math.

CRP emerged as an effort to narrow this gap by addressing the most vulnerable students' cultural needs. A goal of CRP proponents is validating, understanding and valuing the diverse personal and cultural assets students bring into the classroom ([Gay, 2010](#)). These actions are not only driven by acknowledging these strengths, but also by making them central to the curricular content, and generating pedagogies that match the marginalized students' diverse cultural needs ([Gay, 2010](#); [Ladson-Billings, 1994](#)).

1.3. Teachers and CRP: relationship between cultural and achievement gaps

The [U.S. Department of Education \(2016\)](#) demographic data indicate that in contrast with the increasing cultural diversity of K-12 students, 82% of school teachers are White, middle-class. Research has pervasively targeted the middle-class White teacher as being unprepared to meet the educational needs of African-American and Hispanic students ([Gay, 2002](#); [Fletcher, 2016](#); [Walker, 2011](#); [Young, 2010](#)). Numerous studies concluded that teachers, especially White teachers, had limited interactions with different social, and minority racial and ethnic groups, which led to lack of understanding of cultures other than their own ([Cochran-Smith, 2004](#); [Howard, 2003](#)).

This cultural gap has critical implications because it is difficult to value what you do not understand ([Dunn, 2010](#)); a factor that generates and reproduces cultural biases ([Banks, 2006](#); [Dunn, 2010](#)). Teacher cultural biases reflected in pedagogical practices not aligned with the cultural backgrounds, needs, and specific ways of learning of minority students, played a significant role in perpetuating achievement inequalities among different student groups (e.g. [Banks, 2006](#); [Nieto, 2013](#); [Walker, 2011](#)). The National Education Association (NEA), the largest organization in the U.S. representing public educators, whose main mission is advancing the cause of quality public education ([NEA, 2017](#)), corroborated these findings as a prevailing factor that impedes closing the achievement gap (2015).

Bridging the cultural gap is therefore a necessary factor that would narrow the students' achievement gap. To that end, [Sobel and Taylor \(2011\)](#) proposed teachers' engagement in an honest examination of their values and beliefs about cultural diversity. This is a step leading to an in-depth understanding of the broad scope of diverse student needs not only within the classroom, but also outside the school setting.

1.4. Developing Culturally Responsive Competency

Renowned scholars, top proponents of CRP, such as [Gay \(2010\)](#), [Hollins and Oliver \(1999\)](#), [Ladson-Billings \(2006\)](#), and [Nieto \(2013\)](#), have set extensive philosophical foundations advocating for preparing teachers, especially middle-class White teachers, to address the socio-cultural diversity of their students. These CRP advocates called for teacher responsibility and readiness to have *Culturally Responsive Competency* (CRC). [Brown-Jeffy and Cooper \(2011\)](#) also placed this responsibility on the teachers, presenting a long list of what they should and should not do, to become CRC.

However, the bulk of the research has provided teachers with vague and unspecific strategies for doing so ([Fletcher, 2016](#)). For example, [Nieto \(2013\)](#) stated: “[It] takes humility, willingness to learn, openness of acknowledging and valuing the assets of diverse cultural backgrounds and a commitment to public education [to become a CRC teacher]” (p. XIV). [Villegas and Lucas \(2002\)](#) proposed supporting teachers in developing socio-cultural consciousness, responsibility in educational change agency, and familiarity with students' prior knowledge and beliefs students derived from their cultural experiences. [Sobel and Taylor \(2011\)](#) also recommended teachers' continued personal and professional growth in cultural awareness and CRP. They also advocated for strategies to engage teachers in innovative culturally responsive ways to connect with families, their communities and local cultures.

These core ideas, while setting a theoretical framework and a vision for developing CRC, lack specific strategies to guide teachers' actions, as [Fletcher \(2016\)](#) indicated. This uncovers a research gap in connecting theory with practice. Acknowledging this gap has critical implications that call for further research to address this need.

Developing CRC involves teachers' critical self-reflection, on-going assessment of attitudes and beliefs about others' cultures, and developing knowledge of and respect for cultural diversity ([Gay, 2010](#); [Howard, 2003](#); [Fletcher, 2016](#); [Kozleski, 2011](#); [Nieto, 2013](#); [Sobel & Taylor, 2011](#)). [Gay \(2010\)](#) also highlighted the importance of generating classroom communities that value this diversity, and responding to ethnic diversity through curriculum and teaching. These goals open possibilities to conceive specific strategies that would bridge that theory – practice gap.

A key starting point to get these theoretical processes in motion is raising teachers' awareness of how their cultural backgrounds and biases, impact their classroom practices and interactions; in particular with students from cultural backgrounds different than their own ([Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005](#); [Gay, 2002](#); [Howard, 2010](#)). Critically examining beliefs and attitudes toward cultural diversity is a necessary step teachers must undertake to understand the relevance these factors have in their transcultural classroom dynamics ([Sobel & Taylor, 2011](#)). This is a life-long journey that requires acknowledging, addressing and breaking cultural biases.

We all have them; but few have the willingness, determination and commitment to uncover and accept them. However, [Brown-](#)

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