

The Building Blocks: A Return to Cultural Competency Approaches

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I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the scholars speak out series in the Journal of Language and Literacy Education.

I've been training teachers since I was in graduate school, working in teacher education, but also working within the local districts. As an elementary teacher, I held onto the foundations of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) taking into account all three pillars and how those pillars shaped my pedagogical approach. When I shifted to academia, it became clear how conflated CRP had become and how disconnected it was from its original conception. I mean this to say, in a class of twenty-five students, there were five or more conceptualizations of CRP, each focused on the ideas of cultural competence or cultural proficiency. I assumed this was an anomaly but I soon realized that very few students or instructors agreed on the pillars and how they should be assessed. This inconsistency has led to a limited understanding of the pedagogical framework and an approach to teaching that focuses more on representations and adhering to holidays (Banks, 1993) versus listening and understanding.

You might wonder why this is an issue. Part of the call for multicultural classrooms and social justice is wrapped up in the idea that representation matter. We want to create spaces that reflect the pluralistic societies in which we live by including diverse and affirming materials. In teacher education courses, there tends to be an emphasis in teaching preservice teachers how to include diverse materials. Only focusing on the materials does not address the belief (disposition) that all children can succeed, nor does it affirm students identities. Taking up culturally relevant pedagogical approach begins with an ethnographic stance towards the classroom, seeking first to observe, listen, and learn from the students and community in which you are placed and rethink the your instructional approach to help improve educational outcomes for historically oppressed students (Howard et al., 2017). To put aside commonplace beliefs about groups of students/communities. and to become an active observer of time

and place.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995; 2006; 2009; 2014) has spoken about the various ways CRP has been written about and practiced in the fields of literacy and education. She has focused on the ways the pillars were designed to be thought about as beliefs one brings into their classroom teaching. The three pillars of culturally relevant pedagogy are academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2006). To that end, her initial conceptualization of CRP places cultural competence as a belief or disposition that serves to guide an individual's choices and actions. It can be seen and measured through critical reflections about diversity and culture and analysis of conceptualizations of classrooms as a microcosm of the world. Garcia and Guerra (2004) have highlighted that knowledge of cultural difference does not equate to an equitable, culturally responsive pedagogy. However, it provides an awareness that shapes discourse and actions in classrooms.

Burgess and Evans (2017) approach the term cultural competence by breaking it into its individual components. They define competence as attainment of a proficient level of knowledge and skills that are identified through a form of testing. This is followed by a discussion of culture and acknowledgement of the many definitions of culture that have been circulated. I too must admit that when working with preservice teachers, a myriad of definitions of culture enter my classroom, and not enough time is spent on unpacking why there are such variations. Instead, I charge ahead, only adding yet another definition to their web of knowledge from which they must make informed decisions. I, like Burgess and Evans, lean towards Geertz's (1973) definition of culture which is described as contextual and fluid. The iceberg concept of culture discusses surface level culture such as food, dress, and language celebrations, versus deep culture which is a mixture of unspoken and unconscious rules such as rules of conduct facial expressions ideals of child rearing concepts of past and future notions of leadership and more. Milner (2011; 2017) argues that a focus only on broad conceptualizations of culture limits the transformational power of culturally relevant pedagogy by decentering the naming and recognition of students' racial identities and more.

Continua of Cultural Competency

I return to my current context, teacher education. Preservice teachers do not automatically come with culturally relevant pedagogical approaches, nor do they embody a full degree of cultural competence as is described across the literature. Cultural competence is an ever-growing skill set and beliefs that can be thought of as on a continuum. Ladson-Billings (2006) listed cultural competence as the hardest pillar to describe. Young (2010) highlights the skill of knowing your students as critical to supporting diverse sets of students. Extending on this discussion, I view cultural competency as a continuum that is a flexible model which recognizes how different context impacts students' application of all pillars of CRP.

As we move across contexts, students can and will exude varying levels of cultural competence as highlighted earlier. The same is going to be said for teachers already in the field. While they may have scored highly in school in their cultural dispositions grounded in CRP, that can and will change when they are in the classroom. Conceptualizations of culture are known to be ever changing and not static (Milner, 2017). In teacher education programs, preservice teachers are still developing their voice and place within the profession. They have limited time to learn and apply theoretical and practical models learned in their courses before being placed into field placements and having to perform. It turns out that this is really hard. This reality poses problems for content, but also for the growth in students' dispositions we hope to observe. The notion of a continua is that within a particular context and time students may present with high degrees of cultural competency, but those levels can grow, remain stagnant, or wane depending on the context. Meaning that our levels of competency are always shifting. As a black female faculty member, my students behaviors and beliefs may manifest in ways that my colleagues do not observe. My cultural background and experiences in teaching also influence how I understand and interpret the behaviors from my students.

Why Continue the Conversation around CRP?

We know what happens when teachers enter classrooms with deficit beliefs and practices. In places like Indiana and Michigan, teachers have cut Black students' hair, teachers cursed children and their families. In places like New Jersey and Ohio, teachers removed students' hijabs in class. These

are but a few examples of the damage to learning and child identities that have taken place in classrooms when CRP is not well established or assessed in teacher education programs. The formula for approaching CRP, more specifically cultural competency, in teacher education must be more than a checklist of behaviors that meet a set of predetermined guidelines. It is an investment in the individual lives of our students that transcends a particular time and place.

Conversations with my preservice teachers about cultural competency is usually a statement of appreciation for all of the students in their classroom and making sure they have materials in their classrooms that reflect their students. Again, I say, yes these things are important, but where do these statements place them on the spectrum of cultural competency? I would argue the lowest tier, because these comments and actions are not grounded in the other two pillars of CRP: academic development and critical consciousness. How can we assert advocating for diversity without also recognizing that cultural competencies are also enveloped in beliefs that all children can achieve? How can we advocate for understanding that students' identities are also wrapped up in their cultural backgrounds? Creating a classroom environment that is reflective of a variety of cultures without discussing your individual growth with concern to larger conversations about culture to include race, politics, equity, gender, etc. is a surface level understanding which focuses more on literary elements versus a dispositional shift.

Continued Calls for Cultural Competency

How can teacher education programs and more importantly literacy faculty help prevent some of the tragedies we have seen in the news? When looking for evidence of culturally relevant pedagogy, specifically cultural competency, you should consider the following about your teaching environment and student responses:

- Do you invite critical and controversial topics/discussions into your classroom?
- Are observations of students verbal and written responses considered?
- Are aspects of CRP embedded into assessments?
- Do you model affirming students cultural identities in your

classroom?

- Are discussions of multiculturalism asking for literal, inferential, and/or critical levels of understanding?
- Are your observations of student dispositions shared with colleagues during the semester, after the semester, or both?
- Are discussions of race layered into students' understanding across content areas (Milner, 2017)?

These are but a few reflective questions I ask myself when thinking about the role of CRP in my courses and in thinking about the growth of my students' dispositions.

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