

The Value of Critical Self-Reflection in the
Development of Cultural Competency

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VALUABLE

CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

The Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning program at the Community College of Baltimore County collects reflections from workshop participants for each training module.

ABSTRACT

The Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning program at the Community College of Baltimore County collects reflections from workshop participants for each training module. The purpose of these reflections is twofold: firstly, for participants to examine their personal connection to the theories we present and secondly, for participants to examine how they can utilize the theories and activities in their classrooms and institutions.

In this article we describe the results from analyzing reflections from participants across 3 different educational institutions since 2020.

The overall results showed that participants were at different points in their personal cultural competency journeys, and that they gained practical tools to help students along their own cultural competency journeys.

INTRO — DUCTION

The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) began its journey toward culturally relevant pedagogy in 1999, when the adoption of the Banner system allowed for disaggregating student data.

A group of faculty, staff, and administrators began researching interventions to increase the success rate of minoritized students. This initial inquiry group laid the foundation for what has become the Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning (CRTL) Program within CCBC's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Since 2004, CRTL has been augmenting participants' cultural awareness, helping to change attitudes, adding to their knowledge of others, and strengthening their skills at interacting effectively with students, faculty, colleagues, and others in a college community.

CRTL trains faculty, staff, and students by engaging them in self-reflective processes that allow them to convey to others (students, in particular) the need for self-reflection, self-advocacy, and self-awareness in life's ever changing cultural contexts.

In CRTL's interactive workshops, participants examine their assumptions, gain valuable cross-cultural experiences by cooperating with diverse others, and develop specific knowledge and skills necessary to work effectively with all people. Our aim is to improve participants' cultural competency. To build on Ladson-Billings' (in Landsman & Lewis, 2011) definition, we define cultural competency as "helping [individuals] to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices" while simultaneously recognizing and honoring the cultural beliefs and practices of others.

The training program is based on the research of forerunners in cultural pedagogy such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and Etta Hollins.

The central tenets of culturally responsive teaching are that both faculty and students will engage in critical self-reflection, develop cultural competence, experience academic success, and engage and develop a socio-political consciousness.

These goals are achieved through the beliefs that all people engaged in the teaching-learning relationship will bring their own particular cultures with them to the classroom. Culturally responsive teaching means that we recognize that each of these cultures can be leveraged to be an asset to learning, and that diverse cultural ways of knowing are valid in the academic space. The CRTL Program also draws on the work of researchers and theorists including Claude Steele, Carol Dweck, Charles Mills, Kimberle Crenshaw, Robin Di Angelo, and others.

CRTL's Modules

The CRTL Program currently includes 9 training modules. These modules are usually presented in 2-hour workshops. For this study, we reviewed the reflections from 3 of the foundational modules in the program: the meanings of culture and race, facing Whiteness, and using restorative justice practices to combat implicit bias.

The Meanings of Culture and Race

This module is considered foundational to CRTL training and is normally the first module offered in any training cycle. It explores the multiple meanings of culture and defines and explores race as a social construct. This workshop leads participants through several simple activities that illustrate the CRTL principle that educators must always reflect on how the multiple meanings of our culture influence our interactions with others, particularly students. It explores the origins of race in the United States, as well as how its social construction leads to bias within our institutions.

Facing Whiteness

This workshop offers a space for participants, particularly White people who usually make up the majority of faculty and staff at our institutions, to examine and consider how the social construction of Whiteness affects their lives and experiences. Successful implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy begins when we reflect on our own cultural background, interpret how our experiences affect our practice, and inquire into opportunities for growth.

Using Restorative Justice Practices to Combat Implicit Bias

In this workshop, we define implicit and explicit bias, focusing on the implications of bias on students of color. We then review the framework of restorative justice practices, drawn from Indigenous practices, and use role-play for participants to respond to sample case studies with restorative questions.

Critical Self-Reflection (RIQ)

An important part of our training is asking participants to engage in self-reflection. We must develop critical consciousness through what Hollins (1996) calls the RIQ process: a professional practice that is self-reflective, always interpretive, and characterized by continuous inquiry.

CRTL training uses reflection activities to encourage participants to dig deeper into their formed subjective ideas around the topics discussed and examined in each of our modules.

Through this reflection we encourage engagement with ideas and theories which will foment educators/students/staff to move forward in their own cultural competencies as they do their work. These reflective practices bring about personal and professional change (Calkins & Harris, 2017). Hollins (1996) views this as a "lifelong professional practice."

Historical Context for 2020 – 2022

As we reviewed each reflection, we found it important to discuss the historical context of these particular CRTL trainings. During the uniquely historic time starting in 2020, the country and the world faced what is frequently described as the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racial unrest instigated by the murder of George Floyd. In these years we saw the pandemic rise and eventually wane in 2022 after a shut down that impacted the way we do training; we moved to a virtual format rather than in person, as we did in our classrooms. In the light of the ravages of COVID-19, the culture of the U.S. and the world changed dramatically and a new normal of social engagement emerged. In spring 2020 following Floyd's murder, protests spread throughout the U.S. and the world in support of police reform and in support of Black Lives Matter. This was coupled

with the often-controversial tenure of Donald Trump's presidency. The era of diversity, equity, and inclusion arrived and many institutions of higher learning embraced developing and/or improving their diversity efforts. However, a backlash of White supremacist ideology began in 2021 against critical race theory and against a new president in the form of election denial and an insurrection at the nation's capital. We were mindful of this historical and cultural context as we reviewed these reflections.

Study Intention

This study evaluated the reflections of 62 faculty/staff participants in 3 of our workshops between 2020 and 2022. We wanted to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between critical self-reflection and developing cultural competency?
2. How do these reflections show what participants are gaining through our training?
3. What does this mean for the CRTL program?

METHODS

The Reflective Tool

At the conclusion of each training module, we asked each participant to write a short reflection in response to these 2 questions:

1. What are the ways this workshop applies to your personal life?
2. How can you use the ideas shared in this workshop with your students or in your area of responsibility at the college/university?

Participants

There were 126 participants in the workshops across 3 institutions. We received a total of 62 reflective essays, which we examined for this study. While we did not collect demographic data, based on their responses to the reflections it appears that most participants were faculty, with some administrators also included. Most identified as White, and there were more women than men. Participants were from the following 3 different institutions:

College A: A predominantly White institution (PWI) university involving faculty participants from the school of social work and the school of health professions.

College B: A PWI community college involving faculty participants from several disciplines and a few administrators.

College C: A large, diverse community college involving faculty participants from many disciplines.

After each workshop, participants completed the reflections and emailed them to the CRTL facilitators. We collected the reflections for the 3 modules that were common across the trainings given to the 3 institutions. We first reviewed the reflections and wrote a reflective note for each summarizing the content and commenting on our own perceptions as a form of bracketing to acknowledge potential biases (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

These memos served as an initial analysis and helped to "develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships" (Maxwell, 2013). In the next cycle of reading, we analyzed the reflections to note specific data related to the objectives for the CRTL program. In the third cycle of reading and annotating the reflections, we noted emerging ideas within the reflections for each of the 3 modules. We then met to review and classify our annotations into themes by module.

RESULTS

This study analyzed reflections collected across 3 years from 2020 to 2022, and across 3 colleges/universities. As we reviewed, certain themes emerged from all respondents. We concluded that each fell on a continuum of cultural competency.

Participants' responses reflected their struggle to come to a greater awareness and understanding of their cultural and racial identities and their willingness to engage in critical self-reflection to foster this greater awareness. Responses also revealed the complicated negotiation of race and power dynamics in society. The usefulness of CRTL activities was another important theme.

REFLECTIONS BY MODULE

The Meanings of Culture and Race

This module first focuses on cultural identity construction. Some White participants struggled and sometimes resisted the idea of having a culture. Some said that they felt culture-less and one participant expressed it like this,

"I understand culture intellectually and can identify it in others, but I am often hard pressed to see it in my own family. It's like the absence of culture – but that too is culture. White supremacy culture. Perfections, no emotions, logic only, disembodiment."

They were moving from a White normative view of culture and recognized that in the U.S. people are socialized into the norms of Whiteness (White supremacy). Others approached their cultural identity by searching for their ancestral cultural roots, for example Italian American roots or other European heritages to find their culture. The reflection allowed the participants to go deeper beyond their initial responses and realize they do have culture. The experiences of another participant led her to reflect

"This session made me think more deeply about my own culture. I used to feel that I did not have a strong sense of my own culture, that my family didn't do anything different or special. I used to think that because my family didn't participate in any specific cultural traditions based on their national heritage that we didn't have any."

On the other hand, many participants recognized that reflecting on culture is important

for themselves and in teaching. One participant noted

"The concepts discussed in the Meanings of Culture and Race apply to my life in many ways. As an adjunct professor, I must be aware of the different cultures and backgrounds of those I teach. Learning how race, religion, ethnicity, etc., play out in one's lives is important when approaching a sensitive subject."

They felt the role-playing activity using inter-subjective dialogue allowed them to engage in perspective-taking, meaning making, and dialogue across groups as the only way to understand various points of view. These participants were moving toward cultural competency as they were willing and able to recognize that they indeed had a culture and that in our mostly "segregated society" it is difficult to engage with other cultures as well as their own.

They admitted a challenge growing up socialized into Whiteness. Referencing this, one individual shared "Another concept that resonated is "the meaning one makes of another culture is itself a cultural act. This, to me, speaks to my privilege of being White and the lens I am privileged to look through. I am at the intersection of being White and a woman, and upper middle aged, so my lens keeps shifting based on my life experiences as well as my continuous learning about myself and the world."

"While I have many cultural identities and unique experience, in relation to my role ..., a

For our few participants of color including Black, Biracial, and Asian people, they expressed understanding multiple identities and their own cultures. One faculty member shared

few of my cultural identities include millennial, heterosexual, female, and psychology faculty. These characteristics describe my past and my present in many ways, and it is important for me to reflect upon what this means for my learners."

Comments were made that included how people use culture, race, caste, and religion to otherize people. One participant relayed a story which showed she recognized her cultural norm as different because of her experience of having to move into a new, different culture. She cited the usefulness of Pellegrino Riccardi's (Riccardi, 2015) definition of culture as "A system of behavior that helps us act in an accepted or familiar way." She said, "I realized that much of my growth from that point until now has occurred almost exclusively due to bridging new social groups, engaging in dialogue with folks from diverse groups and working to develop a new consensus of meaning with these folks, all of the things required in order to make new meaning."

Race as a social construct

As part of the workshop, participants were required to complete a racial autobiography. This exercise comes from the guide *Courageous Conversations about Race* (Singleton & Linton, 2007) and is a long reflection of racial construction from childhood to adulthood. Some participants did not mention race at all, as they wrestled with the idea of racial

construction. However, most participants understood that they had been socialized into White culture in predominantly White communities. Growing to adulthood in mostly White towns, rural areas, and suburbs, one individual shared "...the autobiography helped me understand better my advantages as a White middle class boy isolated until 8 years old from contact with different races, my awakening to racism when a "Black" family moved into our all White neighborhood (and my parents and neighbors joined in the panic and the commitment to shunning the family), and my experiences after my parents divorced as our Mom-headed household became poor, moved into a neighborhood of predominantly African Americans on the wrong side of the track, and saw our advantages disappear."

Some participants acknowledged their Whiteness but did not discuss the construct. They did recognize the inequities in power due to their Whiteness. Another telling story included a first experience for a White person with the use of the "N" word, "I had never heard that word before, but I knew it was bad because my father was very angry, and I believe that this experience formed an early connection for me between race and anger. As an adult thinking back on this, I'm obviously terribly embarrassed that my father did this, and my heart breaks for the little girl I was playing with and how that might have made her feel (her father too). This exercise was powerful – and painful – for me."

RESULTS

Through the words of scholar Charles Mills (Mills, 2016), participants began to recognize race as a social construction “developed along unequal lines of power.”

Race and power

Through the words of scholar Charles Mills (Mills, 2016), participants began to recognize race as a social construction “developed along unequal lines of power.” However, some individuals still struggled with themselves as having a racial identity. “I appreciated the discussion around the fact that race is not biological but was created. Before watching the YouTube video, it never occurred to me how the concept of race came to be. It definitely made me wonder how different things would be if we had never placed number values on race and cultures. The concept of intersectionality is very applicable as well. I consider myself a White, middle-class woman where being White and middle class offer me privilege but being a woman often does not.”

Facing Whiteness

In their reflections on the facing Whiteness module, White participants exhibited a range of understanding of their own White racial identity, and Black participants shared their experiences of facing the White identity of others.

Growing awareness of racial identity

Several of the White participants expressed ideas related to an emerging consideration of their White identity. They expressed that the workshop gave them an opportunity to consider racial identity in a way they had never done before: “I’d never truly sat down and thought about facing my own Whiteness before... hearing the stories of others forced me to think about my own privileges.” Some expressed ideas associated with a color-blind mentality, sharing that they had been taught by family that “all races were the same.” In reflecting on the diversity in different areas of their lives (childhood, school, work), a participant noted “It’s telling where I saw diversity [in my life] and where I didn’t; and more importantly, what I interpreted AS diversity and what I didn’t.” The module’s focus on historical interpretation helped some participants in their growing awareness: “I do not recall ever hearing or learning anything about this until now and I find that disturbing. It has made me think about my current thinking and actions.”

Some participants were unwilling or unable to isolate their racial identity, including other social identities like socio-economic status, gender and sexual identity, or political identity as intersecting and complicating factors.

But it's complicated

Living in a mainly White, rural, conservative neighborhood, one participant recognized that "I started seeing the only Black man there as an ally (which is equally ridiculous)." A participant who is LGBTQ said "Skin tone isn't all that leads to discrimination, and it's very important to me not to oversimplify the conversation." Another participant shared that "I did not understand the term 'White privilege' because, as renting farmers, we were not considered middle class."

Getting comfortable being uncomfortable

Engaging in the workshop and the reflection prompted some White participants to grapple with difficult emotions. A participant shared that the self-reflection made them "uncomfortable... I never thought of myself as being privileged." Another participant wrote "I struggle personally with the feelings of guilt I have because of my White privilege." To cope with these difficult emotions, one participant questioned "whether I 'intellectualize' my White identity development. I understand it, and feel it, but then what do I do with the knowledge and understanding?"

Toward anti-racist allyship

Some responses showed that the participants had already spent time reflecting on the impact of Whiteness on their identity, recognizing that they had different racialized experiences from people of color. These responses reflect what Helms (1993) calls the "immersion/emersion" stage of White racial identity development, where people exhibit more "experiential and affective understanding" of their White racial identity, as well as the experiences of people of color. Participants shared that they have become

more mindful of "the many ways in which my Whiteness shows up in my life," or that they "see more clearly that [my Whiteness] is often the first thing that people see and notice when I walk into a room."

With this awareness of their racial identity comes an even greater awareness of "what Whiteness means in the world for people who are not White."

Black participants' perspectives

In their reflections on the facing Whiteness module, Black participants shared their long experiences with facing other people's Whiteness. These experiences led to feelings of shock, fatigue, frustration, and cautious optimism. One participant who grew up in a Black neighborhood but attended a PWI stated that "shock and adjustment that came with attending a PWI for college was a lot to navigate. I think that experience helped me begin to understand Whiteness in a way I didn't before." Others expressed that they are "tired" or "have grown weary" of the constant battle to remind their White colleagues that conversations and action around diversity, equity, and inclusion are necessary. One Black participant, in describing the pushback to talking about racism they received from a White person, explains it this way: "White individuals have a hard time understanding racism... because many of them just do not want to" because their "mind is not wired to care" since White people have not had to navigate anti-Black racism. For some Black participants, the existence of a workshop like facing Whiteness was a signal that their institutions were open to dialogs about race, which provided them with some hope for change.

USING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRACTICES TO COMBAT IMPLICIT BIAS

Critical self-reflection

Reflections from this module revealed deep, intentional, and critical self-reflection. While the other 2 modules caused participants to reflect on their own history, family, and identity, this module prompted people to reflect on their behavior towards others. Participants felt challenged to uncover their unconscious or unexamined biases. They became aware of "how... unintentional language could be misconstrued to undermine others."

The workshop also helped people to consider the complexities of how bias operates in the world, moving beyond a conception of bias that focuses only on race: "When I signed up for the workshop, I really only considered [implicit bias] in relations to race. However, I was surprised when we took a step into the LGBTQ+ and even feminist side of things." One participant succinctly described the fundamental challenge of examining implicit bias in this way: "I think that, particularly for cishet [cisgender, heterosexual] White folks, it can be very difficult to confront one's own biases and then to acknowledge the damage that this bias has done. We often feel a great deal of shame as we come into a place of self-awareness, and it can be hard to step into a place of humility and accept that we need to do some work to undo the damage that we have done, even if in negligence and ignorance."

Relationships with students

Reflecting on their own implicit biases was related to building stronger relationships with students. Especially for faculty who teach a

diverse student body, being mindful of implicit bias was integral to building a supportive community within the classroom as well as educating all students with equity. Faculty were motivated to examine and address their implicit biases because they wanted to ensure that they "treat everyone with the kindness and respect they deserve."

Hesitancy

Some participants, while they found value in the workshop for their personal and professional growth, were hesitant to bring information about implicit bias or restorative justice directly to their students. They were concerned about whether students were ready to examine their own biases, and whether, as instructors, they had the capacity to facilitate these difficult discussions. Participants shared that they were worried that broaching the topic of bias without feeling confident enough "may do more harm than good" or that they wanted "to make sure that what is said to start this process is not offensive or said in a way to harm or offend anyone." Discussions about bias can be fraught, which can lead to avoiding the topics of race, bias, and discrimination. Facing this discomfort requires intention: "When I started teaching at [this institution], I remember presenting material from the literature that made me uncomfortable. There were areas in the literature that described the differences in services to different cultures, regions in the country, our history of oppression and discrimination, etc. I found myself not wanting to go over the subject but made sure I did."

ADDITIONAL REFLECTIONS OF NOTE

"This is probably difficult to answer as I am not sure how it [the facing Whiteness module] applies to my life... From the 2 weeks that I have taken this workshop, I feel enlightened on what Blacks face in their view of the world... This exercise made me realize just how 'White' my world was and how 'White' it is to many."

"I'm tired, and I'm not interested in working with people that I need to 'convince' [that diversity, equity, and inclusion issues are important]."

"My Blackness is the reason; it's the excuse; it's the motivation; it's the source of pride. It's the 'otherness' that I am aware of without regard to others' Whiteness."

"I've grown weary of the cumulative effects of the burdens Black folks have endured to gain equality."

"The restorative justice piece was interesting to me intellectually, but I haven't quite figured out if/how those concepts apply to my life. I've done

a lot of reading on this practice (prior to the workshops) as it relates to victims and perpetrators of crimes but hearing about the context where individuals are harmed regardless of whether a crime was "truly" (as it relates to legal code) committed was a different take."

"I have taken the IAT myself (a few versions) and always find the results interesting and valuable for self-reflection. I worry about assigning them to my students just because if people don't have a good foundation before taking those tests, I think they can be less helpful. Again, I worry that I am not the appropriate person to lay that foundation for students and assigning this type of activity may do more harm than good."

"I took the course because I wanted to learn techniques or at least hear from professionals how to begin an open dialogue with those we teach but also make sure that what is said to start this process is not offensive or said in a way to harm or offend anyone."

CLASSROOM & INSTITUTIONAL APPLICATIONS

There was more coherence in the responses to the second reflection question as most participants had clear ideas about classroom and/or institutional applications. Participants related the theories, materials, tools, and activities to their fields of study and positionality at their institutions. A few felt that introducing restorative justice practices to the college community could be used to address issues at their institutions. Regarding classroom practices, intersubjective dialogue, racial autobiography, role playing activities, the sharing of theories and scholarship around the cultural and racial constructions were cited frequently as useful and specific examples are given below.

They cited working with and responding to classroom diversity. However, some continued to be hesitant to hold these dialogues about race with students, especially at PWIs, but felt with more training and time they could overcome feeling uncomfortable.

EXAMPLES OF

Cultural Pedagogy in Classrooms:

1. Faculty members in the health schools reflected on teaching students to include consideration of culture when evaluating and treating patients. They discussed sharing insights into the challenges of growing up White and how the awareness of differences is equally important for students and faculty. They recognized that students need cultural competency.
2. One person discussed exploring culture in her classrooms and introducing cultural communication norms to her students through intersubjective dialogue. The goal is to recognize that there are many "normals."
3. Another already does various critical race theory type activities in her classes. She was curious how students would react to Di Angelo's White Fragility because most of her students are White.
4. Another could use intersubjective dialogue and role playing with faculty she trains. She considered developing a series using intersubjective dialogue for faculty to combine with diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. They recognized the power of language and use of intersubjective dialogue with students.
5. Using real-world, cultural experiences is useful in math class.
6. Those in social work felt they could find many uses for intersubjective dialogue with their students. Discussions of race and culture are an important part of what they are training these future social workers to do in the field with their clients from many diverse backgrounds.
7. The use of the racial autobiography as a useful starting point for discussion, especially in the health fields where it could be used to teach students to include consideration of culture when evaluating and treating patients.
8. The module on bias had some faculty stating they would examine their course materials for bias and make changes. Additionally, they would use self-reflection on implicit bias to improve students' communication with diverse others in classroom interactions, in health fields, and in social work classes.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Retention decline or retention loss in students has been quantified by multiple studies (Arthur Jr. et al., 1998; Jones et al., 2015; Semb & Ellis, 1994; Wisher et al., 2001). There has been some inconsistency in the extent to which retention declines and the efficacy of corrective methods to minimize the decline.

The metadata analysis conducted by Arthur Jr. et al. (1998) and the retention loss test between distance and traditional learning performed by Wisher et al. (2001) involved recognition tests, requiring a low level of Bloom's taxonomy. Wisher and colleagues (2001) reported a retention loss of 14% to 16%, consistent with Semb and Ellis (1994), and showed no significant difference between the distance learning and traditional groups.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Our examination of these 62 reflections aligns with our intentions for this study of critical self-reflection by educators and answers each of our initial questions.

What is the role of critical self-reflection in developing cultural competency?

Reviewing reflections is an authentic assessment of personal growth and development of cultural competency. Our participants were fully engaged in the process of critical self-reflection and were willing to be vulnerable and honest in sharing their experiences. They questioned their own assumptions about race, culture, and bias to interrogate their beliefs. Several expressed gratitude at the opportunity to engage in this kind of reflection, noting how rare that opportunity was.

How do these reflections show what participants are gaining through our training?

While our workshops focus mainly on the foundational theories that contribute to culturally responsive teaching and learning rather than a methodology checklist, the activities we use in the workshops are adaptable to classroom or institutional use. Our workshop model develops skills in critical self-reflection by using methods like shared stories, role-play, and case studies to develop cultural competency. These methods encourage greater understanding and knowledge of theories around cultural pedagogy by personalizing the learning for each participant. In this way, participants develop the skills in cross cultural discussion, engagement, and understanding necessary in navigating diverse populations.

What does this mean for the CRTL program?

Our impression from these reflections is that the structure of our workshops helps participants to productively engage in these complicated and often times uncomfortable topics. We

present the theories behind each workshop topic, provide activities for participants to actively apply the theories, then provide space for discussion and reflection. As Gloria Ladson-Billings (Ladson-Billings, 1995) would say, "That's just good teaching!"

There is value in collecting and reviewing participant reflections to assess the efficacy of the CRTL workshops. Through reading these reflections we have learned that we are not just lecturing to people, we are providing a communal space for personal and professional growth in cultural competency for educators. Becoming a culturally competent educator is a process that takes time, intention, and reflection. In the busy rush of college life, faculty do not always have the time for reflection on their teaching practice; our workshops provide that essential opportunity.

The results of this study help us to understand participants' initial reactions to the CRTL trainings. Future research to document on how these participants implemented the training they received would help us understand the impact CRTL training has had on teaching practice. Having examined participants' initial reflections as well as implementation, we could then take the next step and study how students perceive the CRTL teaching practices of faculty who have participated in the workshops.

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We are grateful to our workshop participants for the honest and thoughtful sharing in their reflections, which provides guidance to us in our mission and vision to develop CRTL into an effective training program in cultural pedagogy and cross-cultural competency.

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