

August 2021

## Problematizing the Use of the Cultural Autobiography In Pre-Service Multicultural Education courses

Aaron C. Bruewer

*The University of the District of Columbia, aaron.bruewer@udc.edu*

Gilbert Park

*Ball State University*

Jayne Beilke

*Ball State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo>



Part of the [Other Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

### Repository Citation

Bruewer, A. C., Park, G., & Beilke, J. (2021). Problematizing the Use of the Cultural Autobiography In Pre-Service Multicultural Education courses. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 20 (3). Retrieved from <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol20/iss3/8>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Article in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@unlv.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@unlv.edu).

## Problematizing the Use of Cultural Autobiography in Pre-Service Multicultural Education Courses

Aaron C. Bruewer, Gilbert C. Park, & Jayne R. Beilke

### Abstract

This article explores the qualitative methodology of life history as an instructional tool for pre-service teachers at a midwestern regional public university. Specifically, the authors problematize the use of the cultural autobiography assignment for undergraduate teacher candidates enrolled in required multicultural education courses as a way to evolve its use. While life history has the potential to promote critical reflections on one's own position in a complex interplay of power relations, it can also reify pre-existing prejudicial attitudes. The article includes composite quotes from the papers of 85 undergraduate students to support authors and suggests the incorporation of digital tools to make this assignment more meaningful as the authors look to explore its potential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Keywords:* multicultural education, cultural autobiography, college teaching, student disposition, faculty development

### Introduction

Multicultural education has become a required course for most pre-service teaching majors in teacher education programs as it satisfies the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) Standard 4 of the education prepa-

---

*Aaron C. Bruewer is an assistant professor in the Division of Education, Health, and Social Work of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C. Gilbert C. Park is an associate professor and Jayne R. Beilke is a professor, both in the Department of Educational Studies of Teachers College at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana. Email addresses: aaron.bruewer@udc.edu, gcpark@bsu.edu, & jbeilke@bsu.edu*

© 2021 by Caddo Gap Press.

---

ration major framework, which itself is addressing the data that shows teachers tend to be white, middle class females from the suburbs who have limited contact beyond their own cultural milieu (Watson, 2011). An introductory multicultural education course generally includes a study of the various elements of culture and an explanation of why culture is a powerful aspect of life and its relationships to social justice, equity, and privilege based on elements of culture and power dynamics working to break a teacher candidates apprenticeship of observation (Hammerness et al., 2005) that often contains preexisting bias, prejudice and other dispositional characteristics that can inhibit their ability to teach all students. Helping students from the majority culture understand a sense of privilege and existence within their norm in relation to those outside of the dominant culture (Jones & McEwen, 2000) is a central component of the course.

While some aspects of culture are obvious and explicit such as the foods people eat, religious holidays, clothing choices, and hairstyles, other aspects are implicit such as values and locus of control (Pang, 2018). Anthropologist Edward Hall described high-context and low-culture context according to the following five categories: how people relate to each other, how they define space; how they treat time, and how they learn. Asian, African, Arabic, Central European and Latin American cultures are generally considered to be high-context cultures particularly due to less direct verbal and nonverbal communication patterns (Bennett, 2007, p. 48-53). According to Valle (1997, as cited in Pang, 2018), the cultural identity continuum suggests that there are three groups: cultural traditionalists, who strongly identify with his/her/their ethnic community (ies); biculturals who identify with his/her/their ethnic background and can operate well within mainstream society; and assimilationists, who have adopted mainstream values and identify as an American while ethnic membership is not considered important.

Other ways of thinking about culture as educators include examining how cultural identity operates at different levels within the self, community, and larger society, and presenting frames for thinking about this situation. Tatum (2010) presents a framework for thinking about what culture is seen as normal asking, "what parts of our identity capture our attention first?" (p. 6) as teacher candidates consider identity development as a lifetime process that results in dominance and subordination in society, and our relationships we have within that system of normalization. Similarly, Kirk and Okanzawa-Rey (2010) present a look that asks candidates to rank and order the level of connection to a particular part of our identity, taking a look at those subordinate and dominant identities within all of us, as they exist at the Micro, Meso and Macro levels of our existence in society, and how these situations are maintained by stereotypes, bias, prejudice, and discrimination at the multiple levels. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) centers the self within a Matrix of Domination, a view that hopes to shift from an either/or dichotomy to a both/and view allowing for a more complex view of self identity, this can also be examined in the model presented by Jones and McEwen (2000)

presenting a “fluid and dynamic” view of culture situated within core aspects of self surrounded by their multiple categories of identity in the complex dance of identity defined by themselves and others at particular moments created over time. Informed by these, the multicultural education course uses cultural autobiography as an assignment to complicate the students’ understanding of the selves as cultural beings.

### **Personal Reflection and Self-Engagement: Life History as Cultural Autobiography**

While a powerful tool for self-reflection on one’s life history, the cultural autobiography assignment continues to result in reification of bias and previously accepted views on privilege and society as opposed to challenging the dominant learned narratives of a candidate’s life. Through an examination of a recent collection of these autobiographies, it is clear the assignment is beneficial, but requires some retooling to exist into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Digital tools offer the opportunity for teacher candidates to complete a cultural autobiographical assignment beyond a written paper, using internet inquiry, and multiple media to express a more robust and powerful expression of their lives within a sociopolitical context to challenge dominant narratives.

As a required artifact in the university’s Introduction to Multicultural Education course, which all pre-service secondary teaching candidates must take, it is intended to act as a way for each one to engage their multicultural identities in relation to the larger social structure. Students construct this paper across the entire semester, submitting the artifact at the end of the semester as a summative assessment of their reflective learning. As a regional public university located in a rural area, most of the students live within a 90-mile radius of campus. The area is also part of the “rust belt,” an area in the state that has seen increasing numbers of job losses for many working-class families as factory and heavy manufacturing jobs related to the automobile industry disappeared. Also identified as a border state, it has had a long tradition of conservative political views and a significant historical presence of the Ku Klux Klan. In addition, its geographical proximity to the Bible Belt means that students are often conservative Christians. More than 30 per cent of the students are the first in their family to attend college and 80 per cent of all students qualify for financial aid (Midwestern University *Alumni Magazine*, summer 2020). In this context, the introductory multicultural course plays an important role in providing a safe learning and teaching environment for pre service teachers to explore underlying assumptions and biases, while the cultural autobiography is designed to provide students a chance to examine their lived experiences through the lens provided by the course.

**Course Context**

The course itself examines meanings and implications of multicultural education by exploring both historical and contemporary developments as well as prior experiences in American schools, providing teacher candidates a way to examine their whiteness and privilege, and understand the experiences they have had within a critique of that whiteness and privilege (Watson, 2011). It examines the relationships between pedagogies and the cultures of students, explores intellectual and socio-political traditions of multicultural education, and examines possibilities for transformation of schooling (and society) through cultural approaches to education. The course functions as a gateway course, passage with at least a C and a successful disposition is required for full admittance into the teacher education program. The disposition assessment is based upon three criteria: commitment to academic expertise; engagement with people and ideas; and display of appropriate attitudes/behaviors related to professional educators. These three competencies are assessed across the course, including the cultural autobiography, which itself has its own assessment rubric. As a culminating assignment in the course, the Cultural Autobiography (CA) is thought to be a useful tool for pre-service teachers to analyze the world around them and locate themselves within it, giving them the arena to generate an examination energy. They are given the space to write about the various multicultural concepts addressed throughout the course, including equity, social justice and can possibly provide students a way towards navigating a way forward beyond their learned experience to new conceptions, while also addressing the areas of the Disposition assessment. However, the CA is also specifically expressly designed and assigned for students to engage a reflective focus on their life history to explore their understandings of education and society as told through stories in order to challenge the status quo. The assignment is written with the intention to have them examine the function of societal influence on their understandings, their choices, and their life, working to break free from an individualized view of American life and the myths they may buy into, such as that of the bootstrap. Within the overall goal of challenging the status quo the assignment looks to (1) normalize silenced voices, (2) promote the view of selves as multicultural beings, and (3) foster critical examination of their own privileges and disadvantages, as discussed below.

**Normalize Silenced Voices**

The CA assignment seeks to challenge teacher candidates to normalize the experiences of others by normalizing their own voices. This view is informed by the feminists (Freeman, 2002; Thomas, 2000; Reason, 1982) who sought to normalize and validate the voices of women that have been silenced in a sexist male dominated world. This approach asks teacher candidates to question what they take to be neutral and objective or “normal” as actually a biased and objec-

tive understanding that works to invalidate women's experiences and perspectives, as well as others in the minority. To counter this, validating the silenced voices through the CA starts with a process that attends to how one understands how things happened instead of what actually happened, critically examining the moments in their lives when they first encountered or learned about particular concepts like gender or race. Florio-Ruane and Williams (2008) explains, for instance that "remembering the paths our foremothers have taken to teaching involves not only recalling previously known facts but crafting narratives on the basis of learned information" (p. 8). Put differently, CA can give voice to the teacher candidates by offering an opportunity to examine the "reasons and imaginations" in constructing and reconstructing their own pasts (Florio-Ruane & Williams, 2008, p. 8). This should also position the teacher candidates to give voice to their own students, many of whom are also historically and presently silenced. As Tierney (1998) states, "I once wrote that the task of life history and personal narrative is not merely to develop a catalogue of silenced lives, as if the creation of a catalogue is sufficient, but rather, we undertake such research to challenge the oppressive structures that create the conditions for silencing" (p. 4).

### ***Multicultural Existence***

Constructing and reconstructing life history via the CA in teacher education programs can promote a way to understand oneself and others as cultural beings (Chang, 1999; Tiedt & Tiedt, 1999; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Chang (1999) posits, as an example, the goal of cultural autobiography as an instructional tool is "to demand students to unravel their cultural assumptions critically" (p. 1). In her multicultural education classes, she found that her students often saw themselves as a-cultural while associating culture with minorities and foreigners. To these students, she found CA as an assignment that has effectively challenged her students to understand how their own cultures are constituted as multicultural pushing the teacher candidates to see students not as exotic, but as part of the same societal cloth as they are. On this note, Clandinin (2013) points out the fluid nature of cultural stories: "I live in cultural temporal stories, stories that have shaped each of our cultures, whether they are the narratives shaped by cultural plotlines of respect, or cultural plotlines of the connections among all living things, or cultural plotlines of independence and self-reliance" (p. 22). Seeing the selves as multicultural beings is, as Hollinsworth (2013) says, to critically reflect on one's own position and the complex interactions between different aspects of identity" (p. 1048). It could foster meaningful empathy and respect beyond cultural competency about other cultures in multicultural education courses.

### ***Critical Examination of Privilege***

The CA assignment challenges teacher candidates to locate themselves as



active participants in the power relations of the society and schools, as they reflect on their own personal experiences with central aspects of how their identity has afforded privilege or required subordination. This perspective is rooted in critical multiculturalism, according to Ramsey (2014), that “focuses on issue of power and domination; identifies sources of race, class and gender inequities; and analyzes privileges all with the goal of social justice” (p. 46). As teacher candidates empower their voices while positioning themselves as multicultural beings, they are also encouraged to make visible their own privileges and disadvantages based on their own class, gender, race, and sexual orientations in their own CA assignments. More importantly, they are challenged to analyze how these situations impacted their own school experiences as a way to position themselves as educators against the forces that marginalize our less privileged students. In effect, the CA assignment aims to foster what Apple (1992) calls critical literacy of their own through the meaningfully “creating and recreating of meanings and values” of their own lives towards social justice as educators (p. 10).

All together, drawing on the views and frames of culture as presented above, the stated purpose of the CA is for the student to develop a coherent story of his/her/their socialization that examines how one’s views towards differences on issues of race, class, ethnicity, gender, culture, language, sexual orientation, ability, religion, and other social categories were formed and developed, and ultimately influences their own pedagogical efforts in the classroom. How they engage the complicated conversation in the classroom (Pinar, 2014) in relation to content and student is heavily influenced by their life history, as teachers act as curricular gatekeepers (Thornton, 2004) to the classroom. How teacher candidates think, what they know and understand influences what, how, and who they teach. The CA challenges their assumptions, and requires students to, first, describe the sociocultural context of ones personal development in order to let them grow beyond their limited lived experience and development through the interaction with academic literature, other texts, and service hours in the field.

### Life History as Cultural Autobiography

*“Mommy, why are there so many Chinese people here?” my sister asked at the age of seven when we toured through a shopping mall in Chicago. ...The vast majority of the students my siblings and I grew up with were predominantly white. Additionally, I was unaware of poverty lines in our city.*

Life stories have recently seen increased interest on the part of psychologists and researchers who seek to understand human behavior. McAdams refers to single unique events that happen in one time and place as “nuclear episodes” (1985, p. 135). Much like epiphanies, students are asked to identify and describe significant experiences, influences, major events or “turning points” that have fundamentally shaped one’s identity and their social groups.

Students may describe a significant event like going to college, moving to a different town, or meeting a new friend where they can identify the differences before and after the “turning point.” The discussion on the “turning point” is coupled with reflections on how these events influenced one’s values, beliefs, and attitudes towards people in other social groups. Frank (1984, p. 641) defines “turnings” to tell us something not so much about the “real” but about how individuals remember what they perceive to be the real.

*The summer before my senior year of high school held a moment that would ... change my heart and perspective forever. I was working as a camp counselor for a day camp, and in one of my groups was a little boy with autism. Because he did not have an inclusion counselor I spent half of my time that week with him. The experience lead me to work with kids with special needs for two summers... I learned how families are affected...how a family operates is affected by the needs and ability of their family member with special needs or a disability.*

Lastly, and most importantly, the students are expected to demonstrate their ability to connect and analyze their own experiences through the lens of the course.

*What does multicultural education mean to me? I would define it as making deliberate choices in curriculum, policy, and classroom management to include all students and educate them about multiple different cultures other than their own.*

*After considering my personal development and experiences, as well as what I've learned in this class, my final definition of multicultural education is the equitable allocation of attention and resources among students. It creates a welcoming classroom by educating students openly and extensively about issues regarding diverse intersectionalities, from varying perspectives.*

### **Assessing Life History**

While a key assessment in the teacher education program, the CA is assigned in a required course scaffolded by set expectations in a base syllabus focused on critical multicultural education, it is still taught by a rotating group of professors and instructors. Depending on each educator's lens, the course can run differently, though still requiring the CA as a final submission. This provides variation on the concepts and themes focused on by the teacher candidates as they interact with the material that – while similar, - is presented in different contextual milieus.

The CA is graded using a shared rubric for all sections of the course, which is divided into four categories: Diversity, Connection, Analysis, and Communication. The category of “Diversity” looks at one’s ability to consider socio-cultural nuances on issues of diversity, social organization and sources of inequality and relative privilege of dominant groups. “Connection” assesses student ability to connect previously held ideas and knowledge to the class content. “Analysis” expects a student to demonstrate observational skills, analysis, reflection and empa-



thy. Lastly, “Communication” evaluates one’s command of written organization and mechanics of grammar appropriate for a teacher.

### Cultural Autobiography in Practice

An analysis of 85 CAs submitted by student’s reveals that the results of the assignment are unpredictable and varied, often missing the intended mark of both the course and assignment. White students often report that they have no culture, other than remembering an ethnic dish that an Italian grandmother may have made, or focus specifically on family while ignoring larger institutional influences—they engage discussions of Race without using racial terms allowing teacher candidates to pivot and avoid the need for critiquing their own privilege, and inequity (Watson, 2011).

#### **Equity Development and Privilege Recognition**

Some middle class white pre-service teaching majors used the cultural autobiography assignment to identify their own privileges as well as instances of disadvantages to create an opportunity to empathize with their future students while other students identified cultural and social capital in their own families that fostered both academic and social successes at schools show casing the deep opportunities for cognitive growth through the CA. At the same time, they located relative disadvantages and their impact on schooling that opened an opportunity to empathize with their future students who might face similar marginalization process as expressed in the quotations below.

*I do not think I fully understood how well off I grew up until going to college. Growing up it was never a problem for my family to get new clothes when we needed or to go to Florida for spring break...My family was never crunched for school supplies either, though we most definitely never had the best cars on the block. I thought it was all so easy. But what I learned is that sometimes people really do not have an option.*

Evidence of course concepts often comes through, as some students critiqued the myth of meritocracy that hard work alone can produce success by pointing to the barriers facing under privileged students. While not always directly mentioning terms like equity or social justice, stories like this and others provided a chance for some students to even take it farther by challenging themselves to create a safe learning environment in their own classroom where hard work can actually lead to success, inadvertently addressing equity, others more straight forward as some critiqued the myth of meritocracy that hard work alone can produce success by pointing to the barriers facing under privileged students.

*The vast majority of the children at [the field experience site] are African American [children] and the vast majority of staff/volunteers are white. It’s honestly*

*sad to see the racial disparity there of the ratio of black to white children. It made me realize that of all the tens of thousands of individuals living in [the city], the black community seems to be suffering the most, whether that's due to lack of education, lack of opportunity, or lack or whatever.*

Personal experiences during the courses fieldwork helped make the concepts real for the teacher candidates, resulting in the reflective stories sought by the CA. Emotional stories often helped the teacher candidates tie their conceptual understandings together in their minds driving them to think differently about their career and personal views.

*[One of the students at the fieldwork] had no one to wake him in the morning, no one to make him breakfast, and no one to make sure he made it to school okay. My heart shattered. ... I realized the gravity of having kids of lower socioeconomic statuses in my class. [I would like to build] a welcoming and knowledgeable community in the classroom, . . . [with] a sense of togetherness, openness, and respect. Pretending we are all the same and being "colorblind" only pulls a curtain over a huge issue.*

*As a future educator, it is very important that I am able to help change the atmosphere of my classroom to eliminate [instructional and structural] boundaries. My definition of multicultural education is the ability to provide equity in a classroom regardless of culture or circumstance so all can succeed [if they try].*

### **Hard Work and Strict Discipline**

Other students, however, came short of taking a critical look at their relative privileges and other course concepts. Instead, these teacher candidates recounted their own disadvantages in families that made it difficult to reach their potentials, never fully connecting to a critical consciousness sought by the CA. These stories, often rooted in larger misunderstandings beyond the scope of the course itself, resulted in stories that just missed the mark.

*I want to begin before I was born on how I was messed up genetically. It all started when my mom met her boyfriend in California and she did some drugs before I was born. I just had found out as a kid about my history on my birth on what my mom did to me before I was born, and that's when I had questions and found out I was a cocaine baby. I found all this out when I went into elementary school and my grandmother told me by the second grade what my mom did, and wasn't thrilled*

Another way the CA failed to elicit the critical mindset was found in how some teacher candidates portray themselves as heroes who overcame challenges such as poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence and substance abuse in order to blame their future students for their difficulties to succeed in schools. This reinforced the myth of meritocracy, as focusing on these challenges often led to a narrative about how they had to overcome these through hard work, implying

that hard work alone can overcome the challenges, casting family, or other identity categories as the villain of their story, they share how they alone overcame through their diligence, attention to detail and focus in school and life.

*I graduated [high school] because I worked hard but it wasn't easy. I wasn't gonna let my family get in the way of my academics because all they can think about is themselves. That is my life story and I plan to make sure everything goes according to plan.*

While the use of a CA may help teacher candidates identify with the struggles of their future students, it can also hinder them from critiquing and challenging institutional barriers that hard work alone cannot overcome. In fact, uncritical of their own privileges, some pre-service teachers may seek to normalize the ways that school would reward and punish their future students based on family circumstances, the opposite of the assignments purpose. Seeing their lives as the norm, assuming their experience to be the same as others, they fail to create the critical inroads to examine their lives before including their own students.

*Growing up, my parents raised me behind the mindset hard work pays off. They both work in order for us to have food on our table and allowing us to take an occasional trip about once a year. I come from a middle-class family who is successful for the sole reason that they work hard for what they earn.*

*My strict study habits helped me to achieve my academic goals, but only with discipline and hard work was I able to accomplish these endeavors. There have been a few instances when I was distracted or had other responsibilities hinder my studies, so I do in fact struggle from time to time. But I have learned to bounce back and refocus on what needs to be accomplished.*

What the above quotes present, and truly encapsulate, is the wide continuum of student thought at the end of a semester in the Introduction to Multicultural Education Course. Teacher candidates learn about the concepts, but through the narrative they write are not always making connections to their own lives, while others can do just that. With such a variety of responses, an re-examination of the use of the assignment is definitely due.

This assignment can serve as an opportunity for what Hollinsworth (2012) calls “critical reflections on one’s own position and the complex interactions between different aspects of the self” (p.1048). However, as Frank (1995) points out, life history--like race, class, gender and all other categories in a postmodern world—is “a social construct subject to editorializing”—a creation of invention. Memories are recalled for reasons that are important to someone—in large part because of present contextual definitions of what constitute identity, society, and culture (p. 255).

Life history, a culturally produced artifact narrative statement, is a contested term. Schwandt (1997, p. 539) notes that it is also called “the biographical method”. Watson and Watson-Franke (1985) state that a “life history is any retrospec-

tive account by the individual of his life in whole or part, in written or oral form, that has been elicited or prompted by another person” (p.2). Watson (1976) argues elsewhere that the only direct purpose of life history “is as a commentary of the individual’s very personal view of his own experience as he understands it” (p. 97). Dollard (1935) has written that the life history is “an attempt to define the growth of a person in a cultural milieu and to make theoretical sense of it” (p. 3). Life history can be a source of finding one’s identity by investigating culture and family background and arriving at seeing oneself—and other—as cultural beings. Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) distinguish life history from life story by stating “an analysis of the social, historical, political and economic contexts of a life story by the researcher is what turns a life story into a life history” (p. 125).

Recently, the term “family research” has been introduced as a part of life history. In the Special Issue of *Vitae Scholasticae* (2017), contributors were asked to reconsider family research apart from life history. As we know, “family,” too, is a social construction. Individual lives are constant constructs embedded in societal and cultural forces that seek to constrain some and enable others. But beyond recovering memories and untold stories, family research can also serve as an instructional tool. For students who are education majors, family is a focus of belonging, identity, aspiration, and sometimes regret. In fact, as Bailey (2017) points out, family relationships can be a process of inquiry: Family methodology is fertile terrain, saturated with identity issues, ethical nuances, discourses of belonging, as well as absences, secrets, haunting, materialities, and affect” (p. 40). In this dynamic, students describe their own experiences within the realm of family. Building upon that foundation, the question is whether or not students can build upon this paradigm to develop a more global understanding of race, class, gender, and disability.

In December 2019, a new virus known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (COVID 19), was detected in mainland China. By April, it had affected over 200 countries worldwide. This resulted in varying degrees of isolation, unemployment due to business closures, and the cancellation of sporting events and conferences. In May, a black man named George Floyd died after a white police officer knelt on his neck for nearly eight minutes. The powerful video of this act sparked a wave of support for the Black Lives Matter movement and protests against police brutality took place across the country. The upheaval caused by COVID19 and the civil activism that followed Floyd’s death has presented challenges as well as opportunities to faculty who teach multicultural education. In particular, the effect of video evidence and the need for on-line teaching and learning may render a written narrative such as a CA as insufficient and unlikely to provide a call to social activism without an active redevelopment of its intent, purpose and instruction. Tierney (2005) has suggested that the form of the testimonio might do so, however. The testimonio, an important new form of the life history is a first-person political text told by a narrator who is the protagonist

in, or witness to, the events that are reported upon. These works are intended to produce (and record) social change. The author testifies on behalf of his/her/theirs history and personal experience. Understood this way, a life history documents an entry into a life, a portal into a culture different from that of the reader. Such texts become vehicles for self-understanding and could potentially connect memory and history to reflexive political action. (Tierney, 2005, p. 9374-5).

According to Beverley (1992), “testimonio represents an affirmation of the individual subject ..., but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginality, oppression, and struggle. If it loses this connection, it ceases to be testimonio and becomes autobiography” (p. 103). Autobiography frequently looks back at a life, with the author speaking about life’s challenges from a distance. The struggles may have been overcome or not, but the recollections remain.

After reviewing cultural autobiographies submitted by eighty five students, we find that family and life history research that highlights one’s own positionality in the complex web of power relations can function as a powerful instructional tool, but needs a reconceptualization to stay current and make use of new expressions and sources of information. The pattern that emerges is that the category of family receives the most attention in these narratives. Often students write about both immediate and extended family who they grew up with, including their family origins and history. When do we intend a project involving family to transcend that unit, however defined, as an object of interest to investigate broader cultural and social issues, and how do such identifications shape the inquiry?

Perhaps we need to recognize that the CA is reflective of the students’ liminal space: Kennedy (1972, as cited in Clandinin, 2013, p. 128) defined limen as meaning threshold and between what was and what is to be... it creates both the time and space to play with possibilities not yet imagined”. Anthropologists define liminality as standing on the threshold of a new status, a rite of passage, the quality of ambiguity of disorientation that occurs in the middle state when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the rite is complete. It is between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community and a new way. For example, the process between starting college and finishing. There is the need to reengage students’ current social reality as well as we exist within the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Reconceptualizing the Cultural Autobiography**

Two frames may provide a way forward in giving students a liminal space to explore their lived experience in order to create narratives that counteract the solidification of bias or the recalcitrance of teacher educators to take a critical stance on their views of bias, and instead provide a reflexive look towards a larger goal that addresses more concretely the concepts and calls to action in multicultural education. These frames are harnessing digital tools to expand students

efforts beyond the written word to tell stronger, interactive and more meaningful stories—pulling on evidence and material curated to present a more robust and overall vision of the students conceptual understanding and lived experience of the teacher candidates and secondly a rearrangement of the assignment narrative itself to generate more of the robust experiential events to engage a critical discourse using Pinar’s (1994) Currere Method. In any or all of the four turns—Regressive, Progressive, Analytical and Synthetic the Currere framework can be used to engage ones life narrative for amore focused look at their past future and present within the overarching social structure as they develop into multicultural educators who consider social justice, privilege, and equity in their classrooms.

### **Digital Tools and Lived Experience**

Life is a fluid constant not easily fit into a singular narrative, and while student’s complete written narratives many of which are well written the assignment may be missing those voices who do not best write out their views. It is possible there is more to the story unexamined as the telling of that story is truncated by the written word. Teachers can seek to marry structure and play together, allowing students to create and innovate in their developing, multicultural mindsets through the use of digital tools (Douglas & Brown, 2011). Digital stories can bring a teacher candidates text to life, as they create meaning through the combination of images, voice and text (Garrety & Schmidt, 2008) in an expression that potentially is closer to their recollection. Pictures can help tell the story with in a paper, but with a multimedia product, teacher candidates have the ability to not only tell their story, but showcase their understandings through the use of internet, drawing on examples for support and clarity of point. Inquiring into their understandings of race, gender and ethnicity, these digital expressions tap into a broader world of the Internet, painting macro images of how teachers are thinking, what is informing that image, and ultimately how it is all coming together in their pedagogy. In their book *A New Culture of Learning*, Thomas and Brown (2011) challenge teachers to “figure out how to harness the new resources, which make play, questioning, and imagination, the bedrocks of our new culture of learning” (p. 20). This presents as a way forward in reconceptualizing a more meaningful expression—a more authentic view into the mind of the teacher that is not only more clear for the faculty, but potentially the teacher candidate themselves and peers who view the product as well. Students may write something down without truly analyzing, or considering multiple avenues of thought, while in writing a script, combining with images, or linking to a podcast can engage a more complex response. Brown and Douglas (2011) also explain the ability of digital technology to more closely align with how our brain functions tangentially – while in a paper, teacher candidates may feel safest attempting to tell a chronological story from start to finish, in a digital expression, they may tell a story that can more easily

break the mold of linear thought. Digitally concept mapping their ideas using Prezi, generating a free website with Google Sites, or even creating a podcast with multiple episodes gives voice to how the brain may operate in recounting their lived experiences.

Another avenue available within the digital realm is the ability to make these products public. No longer the purview of only the professor, it becomes a product designed to show a larger audience the thinking taking place. Public posts as well, posting on line, putting a face to ideas—these force a reality that can often be obscured by the written word alone, driving a more authentic creation.

### ***Taking Four Turns***

Within the use of digital tools, it is also important to attempt to elicit stronger results in terms of the assignments intent—a critical examination of teacher candidates past as it will influence their curricular present. Pinar (1994) looks at lived experience through four turns, each seeking to paint a vivid and living portrait of an individual's understanding within a particular lived milieu. Pinar (1994) encourages anyone to find what works within Currere for deeper understandings, and it is a natural marriage with a cultural autobiography as within each turn one is to create the most detailed of picture for one to examine for understanding. The currere method instructs students to “paint vivid pictures” of their past and future, for others to see and understand what’s happening. Encouraged to describe in deep detail the sights, sounds and feelings of the moment can help not only the reader, but the teacher candidate themselves. This relates to the “turning points” identified by Frank (1984). In the Analytic turn, for example, the goal of this image is to see the self within the larger socio cultural context, which itself aligns well with the course, as it engages students in thinking about the past and present within a larger context. The purpose of marrying the CA assignment to these directives is to prevent a surface approach that dwells too much in any one area or thought and instead drives home the importance of seeing the bigger picture, the intent of painting pictures and developing detailed images lends itself to digital methods, giving a focus on particular concepts addressed in the course that may be lost in a more narrative linear paper.

### **Overcoming Limitations of the CA**

How does digital storytelling and the method of Currere provide relief for the current CA assignment? Digital technology can perhaps push through the muted discourse noted by Watson (2011) that exists around race, and other concepts as well as seen in the composite quotes. The language used by students would require significant support—evidence and examples to be coupled with their terminology. In this way, the conversation engaged by teacher and students could work to deconstruct the terminology during the narrative creation process and elicit re-



sults more aligned with the expectations of 21<sup>st</sup> century multicultural educators. The digital resources and connections available that may impede a traditional paper format, but provide context and transportation towards connecting the dots for the teacher candidates in a way they can see, support and continue to evolve as they come to see the CA as less a final narrative and more an open conversation continuing through their life while using the four turns of Currere guarantees a candidate considers the full gamut of lived experience, within the societal structure.

### ***Conversation, Connections, and Support***

With digital tools the CA becomes more of a conversation than a one time production, allowing for a more fluid give and take—where students may struggle to express themselves clearly in written word, they may find it easier and more in their wheel house to produce a story to be told. The assignment becomes as much a formative assessment as summative, with the conversational critique and evolution built into the process, professors can more easily address gaps or suggest further readings, providing examples in the moment as teacher candidates develop their work. Web 2.0—and 3.0—is a multimodal interactive existence. No longer static Web 1.0, teacher candidates are active producers generating not just information to be consumed, but interacted with, adapted and evolved. It's still a narrative, its still life history, but the medium is different and can allow for it to feel more like a conversation. Giving students the liminal space suggested, where they can feel safe talking and sharing. This can also allow for peer feedback and critique within a safe environment as each teacher candidate can evaluate the work of others—in effect it can extend the assignment and meld it with the classroom as an active space for learning and growth. Coupled with the four turns of Currere, digital tools provide teacher candidates a chance to visually depict the images they are encouraged to paint for analysis, creating a vivid image for investigation and deconstruction perhaps even through a video essay. Alternatively, students may record audio podcasts that represent each turn, and may include interviews with critical family members and institutional representatives for their views on the matter, presented for further analysis as they explore the regressive turn, before turning to the progressive and waxing eloquent on the type of classroom and teacher they hope to be.

### ***Manipulation and Evidence***

Digital products are easier to adjust and manipulate, and can connect or be cited—like a Wikipedia page—using hyperlinks to footnote stories where they are finding their information for discussion. Students who seek to make claims that are outside of the course itself can provide links to support their thoughts be that news or other sites, and in doing so can require them to face their own assumptions and beliefs in a different way. Instead of just writing something down, they have



to show it—say it and record it—and then support it. There is a complexity that comes with requiring evidence of claims, that can drive students to look deeper at their base assumptions through the submission of supporting information which can provide for another layer of learning within the assignment itself. Attempting to support a myths and fallacies can help break them down as they search for, and find little, to support their claims. Digital visuals help students see the framework, and possibly avoid the shortcomings of a purely written narrative and can further the ability of the candidate's analysis.

### **Limitations**

With all projects, there are limitations and this is no different, as expanding the assignment into the Internet and the use of digital tools brings with it new obstacles to address. Specifically, what if a student does not want their work to be public, or simply creates a surface representation of their views, knowing it will be seen others?

There is the potential for students to find only the information that supports their own bias, and so it is important to address what resources and information are valid and worthwhile, and perhaps taught in conjunction with critical digital literacy. Despite these possible issues, the approach is still one that should be undertaken to keep alive a critical reification that engages current events and a student's own life history.

### **Conclusion**

A critical analysis of one's lived experience is a powerful tool in teacher education, and harnessed well through a reflective process, it provides developing educators with a way forward to break free from their past apprenticeship of observation in teaching, and their own socialization in America by family, peers and school. Through the recounting of stories – significant moments in their lives - situated within the context of an introduction to multicultural education course – it is possible to elicit action in the classroom, and perhaps a reconceptualization of privilege and power as it relates to school, if not students and their own lives. The CA as a tool is valuable, and if retooled for 21<sup>st</sup> century with digital storytelling, teacher candidates can be expanded to prevent reification of bias and stereotypes, and instead result in a critical step forward for social justice and equity in education.

### **References**

- Apple, A. (1992). The text and cultural studies. *Educational Researcher*, 21, 4-11.
- Bailey, L. E. (2017). Introduction: Methodological entanglements in family research. Researching with, on, through and for family. *Vitae Scholasticae*, 34(2), 3-12.
- Bennett, C. I. (2007). *Comprehensive multicultural education: Theory and practice* (6th

- eds.). Pearson.
- Beverly, J. (2000). Testimonio, subalternity, and narrative authority. In N. N. Denzin & Y. S. Yvonna (Eds.), *The handbook on qualitative research* (2nd ed.) (pp. 555-564). Sage.
- Chang, H. (1999). Cultural autobiography: A tool to multicultural discovery of self. *Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education*, 1(2), pp. 1-5.
- Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Left Coast Press.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook on qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Dollard, J. (1935). *Criteria for the life history: With analysis of six notable documents*. Yale University Press.
- Florio-Ruane, S. & Williams, L. (2008). Uncovering paths to teaching: Teacher identity and the cultural arts of memory. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 35(3), 7-22.
- Frank, G. (1995). Life histories in occupational therapy clinical practice. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 50, 251-64.
- Freeman, M. (2002). Charting the narrative unconscious: cultural memory and the challenge of autobiography. *Narrative Inquiry*, 12(1), 193-211.
- Garrety, C., & Schmidt, D. (2008). The evolution of digital storytelling: from enhanced oral tradition to genres for education. In K. McFerrin, R. Weber, R. Carlsen & D. Willis (Eds.), *Proceedings of SITE 2008—Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference* (pp. 916-921). Las Vegas, NV: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE)
- Hammerness, K., Darling-Hammond, L., Bransford, J., Berliner, D., Cochran-Smith, M., McDonald, M., Zeichner, K., (2005). Chapter 10: How teachers learn and develop. In : Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford (Eds), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do*. Jossey-Bass.
- Hatch, J. A., & Wisniewski, R. (1995). Life history and narrative: Questions, issues, and exemplary works. In J. A. Hatch & R. Wisniewski (eds), *Life history and the narrative* (pp. 113-136). Taylor & Francis.
- Hollinsworth, D. (2012). Forget cultural competence: Ask for an autobiography. *Social Work Education*, 32(8), 1048-1060.
- Kirk, G., & Okazawa-Rey, M., (2010). Identities and social locations: Who am I? Who are my people? In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfeld, C. Castaneda, H. W. Hackman, M. L. Peters, & X. Zuniga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice: An anthology on racism, sexism, anti-semitism, heterosexism, classism and ableism* (pp. 9-14). Routledge.
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). Psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2), 100-22.
- McAdams, D. P. (1985). *Power, intimacy, and the life story: Personological inquiries into identity*. Guilford Press
- Pang, V. O. (2018). *Diversity & equity in the classroom*. Cengage Learning.
- Pinar, W. (1994). The method of currere (1975). *Counterpoints*, 2, 19-27.
- Pinar, W. (2014). *What is curriculum theory?* Lawrence Earlbaum Associates.
- Ramsey, S. J. (2014). Autobiography of a teacher: A journey toward critical multiculturalism. *A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly*, 2(3), 45-52.
- Reed-Danahay, D. E. (1997). *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social*. Oxford.
- Reagon, B. J. (1982). My Black mothers and sisters or on beginning a cultural autobiography. *Feminist Studies*, 8(1), pp. 81-96
- Schwandt, T. A. (1997). *Qualitative inquiry: A dictionary of terms*. Sage.

- Tatum, B. D. (2010). The complexity of identity: "Who am I?." In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfeld, C. Castaneda, H. W. Hackman, M. L. Peters, & X. Zuniga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice: An anthology on racism, sexism, anti-semitism, heterosexism, classism and ableism* (pp. 9-14). Routledge.
- Thomas, P. (2000). Cultural autobiography, Testimonial, and Asian American transnational feminist coalition in the "Comfort Women of World War II" Conference. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 21(1/2), 29-54.
- Thomas, D., & Seely Brown, J. (2011). *A new culture of learning: Cultivating the imagination for a world of constant change*.
- Thonrton, S. J., (2004). *Teaching social studies that matters: Curriculum for Active learning*. Teachers College Press.
- Tiedt, P. L., & Tiedt, I. M. (1999). *Multicultural teaching: A handbook of activities, information, and resources*. Allyn Bacon.
- Tierney, W. G. (2005) Undaunted courage: Life history and the postmodern challenge. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.), 537-553. Sage.
- Tierney, W. G. (1998). Life history's history: Subjects foretold. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4(1), 49-70.
- Watson, D., (2011). "Urban, but not too urban" Unpacking teachers' desires to teach urban students. *Journal Of Teacher Education*, 62(1), 23-34.
- Watson, L. C. (1976). Understanding life history as subjective document: Hermeneutical and phenomenological perspectives. *Ethos*, 4(1), 95-131.
- Watson, L. C., & Watson-Franke, M. (1985). *Interpreting life histories*. Rutgers University Press.
- Valle, R. (1997). *Ethnic diversity and multiculturalism: Crisis and challenge*. American Heritage Custom Publishing.