



Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Public Libraries: An Exploratory Case Study of a Library System in a Majority-Black, Suburban District

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Introduction

The theory of **culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP)** (Ladson-Billings, 1995) identifies three criteria of effective teaching and three traits of culturally relevant educators (CRE) for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Based on my professional experience, I believe that public librarians are educators and can therefore benefit from intentionally practicing CRP.

The population for this study was the staff of "Green County Public Library" (GCPL), a multi-branch system in a majority-Black, suburban district in the northeastern United States.

I conducted virtual, semi-structured interviews with participants (N = 30) and reviewed secondary data to:

- (a) Determine where the criteria of CRP and traits of CRE were evident within this population
- (b) Examine how participants perceived the importance of culturally relevant practices in their work

Objective

To understand if CRP can be used as a framework to describe and advance the professional practice of public librarianship.

Main Findings

97% of participants agreed that **public librarians are educators**. Most participants believed that public libraries are *not* neutral institutions and therefore have a duty to respond to social inequities in their communities. Participants' responses are categorized here based on the categories of the theoretical framework. These findings are relevant because they indicate that public librarians serving patrons from diverse cultural backgrounds: (a) demonstrated many of the criteria of CRP and traits of CRE; and (b) had a strong concept of culturally relevant practices in their work. According to participants:

Criteria of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Learner Achievement	Cultural Competence	Cultural Critique
<p>Librarians get to know each patron through reference interviews and continued interactions over time.</p> <p>Libraries serve the immediate needs of their communities.</p> <p>Usage statistics alone do not fully describe the efficacy of library programs, services, and collections.</p>	<p>GCPL's majority-minority workforce was its most apparent example of cultural competence.</p> <p>An internal audit showed that the GCPL collection contained a wide range of diverse titles.</p> <p>GCPL's virtual programming model in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was a huge success; mean attendance was over 600% that of in-person programs from the previous year.</p> <p>GCPL's branches were not designed with cultural relevance in mind; participants felt that communities with more wealth received preferential treatment for upgrades and new materials.</p>	<p>Libraries should strengthen their training standards to improve intercultural communication.</p> <p>In the years prior to this study, GCPL failed to fully support Black and LGBTQIA+ community members and staff.</p> <p>A culturally relevant library is a safe space for the queer community and affirms that Black Lives Matter.</p>

Traits of Culturally Relevant Educators

Positive Conceptions of Self and Others	Equitable Social Relations	Dynamic Conceptions of Knowledge
<p>GCPL staff who were born and raised in Green County felt a strong connection and commitment to their communities.</p> <p>Library systems should recruit and promote staff members who hail from the communities they serve.</p>	<p>Librarians build lasting relationships with patrons, watch them grow, and root for their success.</p> <p>Librarians develop community relationships, go outside the four walls of the library, and foster partnerships with local schools.</p>	<p>Libraries should be places of collaborative learning and librarians should work together to provide the best programs for their patrons.</p> <p>Librarians help develop information literacy skills and help patrons achieve independent mastery of various concepts, including the ability to critique sources of information.</p>

Conclusion

Responses from study participants, corroborated by secondary data, indicate that GCPL staff exhibited many criteria of CRP and traits of CRE. However, more research is needed to:

- (a) Observe public librarians' teaching practices to see if their habits are aligned with their beliefs
- (b) Capture patrons' stories of their experiences in libraries
- (c) Determine whether the theory of CRP can be applied to the work of other public library systems throughout the country

Acknowledgements/ About the Author

Sarah M. Garifo is a public librarian, former elementary school librarian, and a PhD candidate in literacy at SJU.

Many thanks to my dissertation committee (Dr. Kyle D. Cook; Dr. Clare W. Irwin, & Dr. Nikki Chamblee) and the administration and staff of GCPL, especially the participants of this study.

Reference

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–591. tinyurl.com/GLB-CRP