Teacher Positioning in Rural Spaces: The Role of Autobiography in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy[1]

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In this qualitative study, we ask how 40 rural educators of English learners (ELs) culturally position themselves and their students. We obtained data through a cultural autobiography assignment that prompted teachers to describe their interactions and relationships with others. Drawing on both rural and non-rural experiences, teachers established their ability to exercise agency, mediated by individual histories and beliefs and the context of their rural settings. Teachers developed their capacity to reflect on the ways they position themselves toward their ELs, a crucial first step in creating culturally sustaining pedagogy. Implications point to the potential of cultural autobiography as a means to heighten rural teachers' awareness of how their experiences and interactions nuance their cultural identity. Such reflections can expand notions of culture beyond common social identifiers and enable teachers to forge links with their students that would otherwise not be apparent. We suggest this autobiographical process is particularly important for rural teachers who are new to teaching ELs in their classrooms.

Keywords: culture, English learners, narrative, rural, teacher education

Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other side.

—Blaise Pascal, 1660

A vision of truth as socially, culturally, and geographically bound is one that acknowledges differences in how we understand and interpret our experiences. This qualitative study reveals how one group of rural teachers narrated the ways in which they understood culture and language, helping to create the conditions for a culturally sustaining pedagogy for their students in the process of learning English.

Educators in rural areas of the United States now encounter a diversity of students similar to what their urban neighbors experienced decades ago (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Johnson et al., 2014). These students include English learners (ELs), some of whom are individuals of color, recently arrived immigrants, and/or children of former transitory workers with limited economic resources (Lavalley, 2018; Lee & Hawkins, 2015). Their teachers, in contrast, are part of a profession that remains largely white, middle class, and monolingual (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Tale et al., 2017). Scholars confirm that educators who do not share their students' backgrounds often do not feel competent to teach them (Pettit, 2011; Reeves, 2006; Walker et al., 2004).

The geographic isolation and financial constraints of many rural school districts mean that teachers frequently teach without the support of language specialists or a strong understanding of pedagogy that would sustain culture and language. Professional learning to enhance these teachers' capacity to serve ELs is thus a pressing concern for

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[1] The views expressed are the authors' own and not necessarily those of the U.S. Government's.

rural districts (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017). A goal of such professional learning is for teachers to value and nurture their students' diverse and dynamic cultures (Erickson, 2010).

We examine teacher response to one aspect of professional learning, a cultural autobiography assignment that asks teachers to describe interactions and relationships with others. This work involves teachers gaining access to the real and imagined communities that form their identities and instructional practices (Kanno & Norton, 2003) as they consider their own culture in relation to their students' cultures (Phelps & Graham, 2012) via written narrative. Throughout this paper, we refer to students as English learners or ELs to be consistent with the language used by the teachers in our study.

Research Literature

In this section, we review the research that frames our study design and interpretations. The question posed in the study emerges from the junction of two areas of scholarship: rural education as it relates to English learners and cultural autobiography as a means of teacher professional development.

The improvement of education for rural ELs, including characteristics of these students and their teachers, are topics underrepresented in education research (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017; Coady, 2020). Much of what we know comes from studies of teachers and students in urban and suburban locales and studies of rural education more generally. There is a growing body of work, however, that combines a focus on ELs and rural education. Although far from comprehensive, this research provides a starting point for future studies needed in this subfield. Studies of rural demographics, for example, tell us that rural populations are not fixed and ELs are increasing in the classrooms of new rural destinations, primarily in central and southern United States (Lee & Hawkins, 2015). In these new destinations, providing good instruction for ELs is complicated by a host of factors such as geographic distance, uneven numbers of ELs across the locales, and teachers unprepared for changes in cultural and linguistic diversity (Coady, 2020; Lee & Hawkins, 2015).

Studies of rural ELs also tell us some factors that could mitigate these complications. A qualitative study of rural teachers in Texas found an association between teachers with coursework in EL instruction and teacher belief that they could teach Els (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016). Teacher perceptions of online professional learning were positive in a study of rural teachers of ELs in North Carolina (Manner & Rodríguez, 2012). A review of literature in the context of rural South Africa affirms the importance of language-sensitive instruction for ELs (Mncwango & Makhathini, 2021). These studies indicate that EL-focused professional development for rural educators can make a difference.

One technique of teacher professional development that has been well established in non-rural settings is the encouragement of introspection through autobiographical narrative. Narrative inquiry uncovers individuals' thoughts on their experiences, and the narrative writing process is useful as "a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17).

Autobiographies focused on culture help teachers gain perspective on how their cultural background, experiences, and values shape their teaching and relationships with students (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016). Chávez and others (2020) found cultural autobiography to be one way the college-level teachers in their study deepened their sense of culture and ability to transform their teaching. Cultural autobiography and other forms of reflection have been shown to allow teachers to realize the implicit biases and privileges they hold, to engage more deeply with their students, and to become more culturally responsive (Bersh, 2018). These studies focus largely on culture as defined by race, ethnicity, or gender and consider teachers in pre-service undergraduate contexts. The question of how cultural autobiography enhances teacher performance within their own classrooms, specifically in rural contexts with changing EL demographics, has not been a common focus.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis for our inquiry entwines concepts of rurality, teacher narrative, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and positioning theory. We describe each of these concepts in this section. Broadly, we accept the sociocultural idea that interaction with others shapes individual understandings (Vygotsky, 1978).

Rurality

Rurality is a multilayered concept that neither policy nor research has defined in a uniform way (Dunstan et al., 2021; Thier et al., 2021). Among other features, rurality is defined by geography, economy, population density, and community. State education agencies (SEAs) typically follow the federal government in defining rurality in terms of geographic distance to urban settings (e.g., geographically fringe, distant, or remote). This way of defining rurality does not capture its cultural strengths or complexities (Stephens, 2019). A sociocultural view characterizes rurality as heterogeneous spaces of cultural meaning, tradition, and heritage. In this vein, Chigbu (2013) defines rurality as "a condition of place-based homeliness shared by people with common ancestry or heritage and who inhabit traditional, culturally defined areas or places statutorily recognized to be rural" (p. 815).

In our study, rurality reflects these different facets of meaning. Our teacher-participants resided and taught in rural areas as defined by the SEA. Their cultural autobiographies also conceptualized rurality as place-bound yet fluid, reflecting participants' multiple histories and positionalities. Rural therefore encompasses both the physical space as well as the people who inhabit that space.

Teacher Narrative

The cultural autobiography assignment that provides the focal data for our study prompted teachers to describe the stories, communities, and interactions that they perceived as significant in their lives. We intended the assignment to serve as a mediational tool for teachers to reflect on and process their experiences in the context of their present work with ELs, and with the understanding that narrative is a process that promotes

transformation (Bakhtin, 1981; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narratives that resulted represent a window into the ways in which rural teachers conceptualize culture, particularly when relating to ELs. An assumption we make is that by providing teachers with the opportunity to consider their cultural identities, we help teachers possibly refocus their perspectives to meet the needs of different types of students in their communities. We see this as a process toward greater capacity for culturally sustaining pedagogy. Writing their narratives is anticipated to help teachers approach a view of "cultural differences as a doorway that invites learning about other cultures" (Oxford & Gkonou, 2018, p. 410).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Culturally sustaining pedagogy "seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 93). The concept builds on the work of Ladson-Billings and culturally relevant pedagogy (1994), Gay and culturally responsive teaching (2000, 2013) and others (Bassey, 2016) to further equitable access as a given for ELs.

In autobiographies, authors do not merely record events as they occurred but interpret them through their unique lens, which represent each individual's subjectivities and accumulated experience. During the process of writing their cultural autobiographies, our teachers necessarily took up positions for themselves, and they assigned positions for others that appeared in their stories. These positions were often tacit, not conscious, or intentional, but nonetheless important for portraying their stories in a particular way to us their instructors. We therefore found positioning theory relevant to analyzing teachers' written narratives.

Cultural Positioning

Examples of positioning theory used to understand the relationships between teachers and students in general have been steadily growing (e.g., Andreouli, 2010; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; McVee, Brock, & Glazier, 2011; Tirado & Gálvez, 2007). Harré and van Langenhove (1991) explain that "positioning can be understood as the discursive

construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts" (p. 395). Although Harré and colleagues first described positioning in relation to conversation analysis, subsequent researchers have applied the theory to a variety of discourse genres. Davis and Harré (1999) use the term *reflexive* to describe the kinds of positioning that individuals take up for themselves, and they call the positioning that subjects assign to others *interactive* positioning. McVee, Hopkins, and Bailey (2011) expanded the self-other definition in their study of teachers' discussion about literacy, identifying specific ways in which their teachers positioned *self* and *other*. These included self-as-other; self-in-other; self-opposed-to-other, and self-aligned-to-other.

In line with positioning theory's emphasis on interactions between self and other, we understand culture as complex and fluctuating in response to these interactions. We adopt Dewey's 1916 statement of culture "as the capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one's perception of meanings" (p.123). We agree with Oxford and Gkonou (2018) that culture offers a framework for examining social, historical, and imaginative phenomena. We therefore began this project with the assumption that continually examining cultural beliefs is essential for teachers of ELs.

Research Design

Our research design supports the analysis of qualitative data related to rural teacher professional development through cultural autobiography. The research question driving our analysis was how do rural teachers of English learners culturally position themselves and their students? Specifically, we examined how teachers positioned themselves and others in relation to various conceptualizations of culture. In this section, we describe the rural context of our study, the participants, our data sources, our positionality as researchers, and our data analysis procedures.

Rural Context of the Study

An estimated one million Virginia residents live in rural areas, or about 1 in 8 individuals (Pender et al., 2019). Our research encompasses seven school districts within the state that were defined as rural-remote (n=3), rural-distant (n=3), or town-distant (n=1) at the inception of the study by the SEA. These categories represent geographic distances of five or more miles from an urban area. The identified rural districts, because of a growing number of ELs (primarily Spanish- and Haitian French-speaking) during the approximately five years prior to courses began, had to shift their staffing and priorities. Administrators in these districts reported some of the same issues as found in the rural communities studied by Lee and Hawkins (2015), namely an isolated and underresourced ESL/bilingual teaching staff and a local community unsure of how welcoming they felt toward these new students. One of their key efforts was to collaborate with our university to build teachers' knowledge through graduate coursework on ways to support ELs.

Participants

The data represents the cultural autobiographies of five cohorts of rural public school educators, all of whom voluntarily enrolled in a grant-funded online graduate certificate program on instruction for ELs from 2013 to 2017. We analyzed autobiographies from every participant who agreed to take part in research (n=40). Thirty-five participants were pre-K/elementary or secondary classroom teachers of subjects that included art, ESL, English or foreign language, mathematics, music, science, special education, and social sciences. Five were teachers or former teachers serving in coach or specialist roles (e.g., library media, reading). Participants ranged from first-year teachers to teachers with more than 20 years of experience. All were female. The majority identified as White and monolingual, but teachers of color and speakers of other languages were also included. Table 1 displays the grade level and role of teachers represented. Teacher self-identity is more fully described in the findings related to social identifiers.

Table 1
Description of Participants

Level	Number of Participants
PreK/Elementary	21
Secondary, Middle	8
Secondary, High	8
Multiple	3
Role	**Number of Participants**
Classroom Teacher	35
Coach/Specialist	5

Data Sources

Data was drawn from a course addressing the complexities of teaching diverse students (Development and Diversity), one of five online courses teachers were required to take as part of the graduate certificate. The other courses were applied linguistics, foundations of reading, second language instructional methods, and second language reading and writing. For the majority of teachers, the diversity course was the first in the sequence of courses about teaching ELs. Due to personal scheduling constraints, two of the teachers took the course after they had already completed one or more courses in the certificate sequence. The course learning goals were for teachers to examine critically their own experiences and beliefs about culture; to apply theories on the role of culture to teaching and learning; to develop instructional methods that connect with the diversity of ELs; and to investigate ways to build partnerships with EL families and communities. The first major assignment was the written narrative in which teachers described their individual beliefs, recalled significant interactions with others, and conceptualized their relationships with larger communities and institutions. The completed assignments form the basis for our analysis. The assignment prompt is included in the Appendix.

Researcher Positionality

As authors, both researchers were intimately involved with the course and assignment as faculty at the university. The first author served as the instructor or co-instructor for four of the courses. The second author served as co-instructor for the first course and as project evaluator for the certificate program. We read the autobiographies initially for the purposes of course assessment.

Once teachers completed the certificate program and their grades were submitted, we de-identified autobiographies, assigning a unique numeric identifier for each that retained the teacher's grade level and content area. We later transferred each numeric identifier to a pseudonym to personalize the data representation. We then reread the autobiographies across all four cohorts for analysis about how rural teachers conceptualize culture. The analysis process occurred the year following the end of the program, allowing us time to distance ourselves from the course and analyze the assignments with a fresh perspective. The numeric identifiers and the time elapsed between the course and analysis process facilitated our capacity to focus on the content of the autobiographies apart from our relationship with the teachers; however, as instructors of the course, we carried with us memories and associations of the participants as students.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative and interpretive process resulting in codes that were synthesized into thematic findings addressing our research question (Creswell, 2014). Separately, we read each autobiography and assigned codes for themes that emerged from the narratives. Throughout this process, we shared impressions, documented informal interpretations, and discussed alternative explanations in conversations and in subjectivity memos. Initial codes reflected emergent themes and at times were represented *in vivo* by participants' words. Subsequent readings of the data and evaluations of patterns of codes led us to positioning theory as a framework to capture the ways teachers made meaning of culture. Using McVee et al. (2011) as a foundation, we examined

narratives for ways that teachers positioned themselves in relation to others (reflexive positioning) and for ways that they assigned positions to others (interactive positions). At times, the others in teachers' autobiographies ranged from the ELs in their classes to their families, friends, and neighbors to hypothetical groups of people with particular social identifiers (e.g., other races or social classes). Specifically, we found that emergent codes showed how teachers positioned themselves in relation to various others who appeared in their autobiographies; these positions assigned dynamic, and at times contradicting, identities for teachers, significant others in their lives, and the ELs they taught.

Findings

In this section, we examine themes depicting how teachers positioned themselves in reference to their cultural experiences, roles, and connections to *other.* We first explain how teachers understood themselves as related to common social identifiers. We then describe two main themes of positionality that emerged between teachers and their students. These themes were evidenced not only by the content of teachers' narratives but also by the language choices they used to express themselves.

The assignment was intentionally broad to allow teachers to write about elements of culture that resonated with their experience. That is, our assignment prompted teachers to consider aspects commonly included in academic or popular discourse (i.e., disability, ethnicity, gender, language, race, religion, and socioeconomic status). Teachers' written discourse demonstrated their sense of cultural place in terms of the social identifiers they chose to include. Identifying themselves as part of particular cultural groups allowed teachers to position themselves variously to their students. Our analysis documented the aspects of their lives that participants chose to share when asked to examine their own culture.

Social Identifiers

Table 2 shows the frequency of each of the social identifiers noted in teachers' cultural autobiographies and explicitly mentioned in the assignment prompt (Appendix). At least a few teachers mentioned each aspect of culture listed in the prompt, but the concepts of religion, race, and socioeconomic status appeared in more than half of the teachers' autobiographies. We also added the category of *values or character* to our list in Table 2. Twenty-two teachers identified their culture with particular values, individual character, unique experiences, or perspectives often attributed to their families or ancestry.

Table 2

Social Identifiers

Dimension	Number of Participants
Religion or Faith	35
Race	26
Socioeconomic status	24
Ethnicity	22
Language	20
Gender	12
Disability	8
Values or character	22

Religion or Faith

The majority of teachers (n=35) referenced their religious backgrounds as being a core aspect of their cultural identity. Many of these teachers affiliated themselves with organized religions, using terms such as Baptist, Catholic, and Christian to define themselves. Others simply described the importance of religion or church in their lives, often connecting faith to their teaching. For instance, Olivia, a second-grade teacher, wrote,

> I think the biggest influence on my acceptance of differences was because of the strong faith base that my family has in our church and the belief system that I have from its teachings. Acceptance and tolerance are lessons that I have learned from a very young age.

Faith and established religion were described as a source of foundational values that drove teachers to treat students fairly.

Race

Twenty-six teachers identified themselves by race in their autobiographies. Teachers self-identified as White or Caucasian, African American, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Latina, Native American or as belonging to some combination of racial groups. Teachers who wrote of race as a meaningful aspect of their identity tended to be those who self-identified as not White. Cultural autobiographies in this group referenced unfair treatment and racism. Brittany, a middle school teacher, wrote of being unwelcome at her chosen university as well as how it influenced her academic choices. When describing her experience as a new college student, she wrote, "everybody at [name of university] did not appreciate the presence of Black students in that school, not even the teachers." For this small group of teachers, race was not something represented by others but part of their everyday lives and histories.

Teachers also wrote of the otherness of race in explaining what they perceived to be an indistinct and invisible culture, alluding to rather than naming their race. The following statement is indicative of this finding: "As I grew up in upstate New York, we only went to school with White [sic] children. The only time we ever saw a Latino family or an African American family, it was on television or when the 'pickers' would come from Jamaica during apple picking season" (Willow). Here, Willow, an elementary school teacher, does not consider whiteness as race and is silent on her own racial identity. She instead associates race with the Latino or African American families she occasionally encountered. The sheltered communities that teachers experienced early in life served as contrast of cultural epiphanies teachers had because of meeting difference through migration, teaching, and other life events.

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Twenty-four teachers included their past or current SES as part of their cultural identity. In many cases, these teachers simply offered commonly used language to situate themselves in terms of socioeconomic status (i.e., blue collar, poor, not rich, not wealthy, working class, middle class, upper middle class). However, there were also teachers who qualified or even avoided this terminology, choosing instead to more fully explain where they saw themselves with regard to status. Three examples illustrate how teachers expressed the variations in their SES: "Others could argue we were poor ... and they would be right in their assessment. Who cares?! I was HAPPY! No one can argue with that" (Jocelyne, high school teacher); "My mother's dedication allowed me to grow up in an economic situation that afforded many opportunities" (Laura, elementary school teacher); "I grew up in a working community.... I consider myself a middle-class citizen based on the assets I own and my educational background" (April, elementary school teacher). These statements suggest that socioeconomic status was not simply an abstract label but a piece of identity that was important to clarify and align with their view of themselves.

Values or Character

Teachers' cultural autobiographies (n=22) also referenced family and particular values as a factor in their cultural identity formation and, in some cases, approach to teaching. As with religion, family values often represented a positive aspect of their lives. For instance, teachers described mothers who modeled a love of reading, individual grit or determination, or a strong work ethic that persisted over generations of family history. Willow wrote how

showing respect represented a core family value: "My dad's side of the family owned a local [h]ot dog stand.... Their business was so personal that they didn't call numbers when your order was ready, they called names. It's important to remember people. It's important to give people respect."

Researchers have found that teachers may be so entrenched in a culture that they fail to recognize it or its influence (Ndura, 2004). They position themselves as individuals without a culture and their students as individuals whose culture needs to be fixed or responded to in some way. Although some of our teachers demonstrated degrees of this lack of awareness, we argue that the act of reflecting on their identities in relation to larger cultural and community affiliations enabled teachers to position themselves and their students in constructive ways. We next describe findings related to teachers' positioning.

Positioning

One prominent theme that emerged from our data illustrates how teachers positioned themselves as culturally privileged in relation to their students. Tellingly, our findings also reveal some of these same teachers positioning themselves as aligned with, or similar, to their students.

Teachers Positioned Themselves as Culturally Privileged

The majority of participants (n=24) reflected on their life experiences with at least a tacit understanding that they benefited from social and/or economic privilege. We posit that reflecting on their own culture gave teachers the insight to position themselves in this way. Eight of these teachers explicitly mentioned how they were privileged in contrast to the students they teach and/or their neighbors or friends. These teachers stated that they were appreciative of specific support or opportunities they received that their students did not or they contrasted their youth experiences directly to others. For instance, Esther, a reading specialist, explained that she was "aware that my students may have a worse home life than I do." Others articulated a sense of privilege implicitly through the language they used to describe the experiences of their peers or students. One

characterized "diverse" students' circumstances as "heart-breaking." Danielle, an elementary school teacher, explained how a mission trip to Brazil "opened [her] eyes." This teacher continues to explain how the mission trip led her to pursue teaching, writing that "I can lend a helping hand when it is needed, especially for those that are unable to meet their own needs." Therefore, while this teacher does not directly compare her experience with others, she understands her position as privileged in contrast to those who may have fewer resources. Teachers articulated privilege in various ways: class or economic favor, family members who provided support and role models, and home and school congruence.

First, of the participants who described themselves as privileged, many referred to privilege in terms of class or economic resources. These teachers recognized the opportunities they had as children and youth because of their relative economic wealth. Rosalind, an elementary school music teacher, wrote, "I do believe however that growing up in a middle class family allowed me great opportunities including private clarinet lessons, attending summer camps, and travelling." Rachel, a middle school English language arts teacher, only recognized her economic privilege in retrospect as an adult. She wrote that as a teenager she felt her family "had very little" compared to her friends who "had nice things, new things." However, she explains that, "Now that I'm living in [name of rural community], I can see that we actually had a lot growing up. We had more than some of my students—and even co-workers—have now."

Second, teachers described the privilege of having role models, often drawn from their family. Willow's statement that "having a strong sense of family has been one of the most important lessons in my life" exemplifies the prominent influence that family had on many teachers. Willow particularly valued the work ethic of her family, stating "you are a product of your home environment. Working hard and doing things for yourself is something my parents have taught me from day one." As with many other teachers in this study, she connects her family life to her actions as a teacher. She explains that she entered the teaching profession to "pay it forward" and "give back to young students."

Teachers who emphasized the influence of role models did not necessarily acknowledge the possibility that their cultural position growing up may have contributed to socially desirable situations. Rosalind described her home environment as a White, middle class household. She wrote, "I also do not believe that my strengths or personality traits have been influenced by my ethnicity, language, or race. I am the person I am today because of the positive role models I have had throughout my life."

Finally, some of the teachers recognized that their families supported the same values and expectations of their classroom teachers. Olivia, for example, who wrote that she was a first-generation college student explained, "I could remember both my parents drilling it into me that I would be the first in our immediate family to go to college." While Olivia did not explicitly contrast her family's college-going expectations with those of her students, she juxtaposed their different situations at the end of her autobiography. She attributed her success in school to her family's "positive impact" and said many of her students "do activities together at home that promote higher level thinking." Maria, a high school Spanish teacher, discussed the congruency between home and school in terms of native language. Growing up as an English speaker, she believed "one only fails if one does not try." As with some of the teachers' reflections on their class privilege, she only recognized how her position was one of privilege when she encountered students in her role as a teacher.

In general, teacher cultural autobiography uncovered differing levels of understanding of the privilege that enabled the teachers to achieve their current role as educators for ELs in a rural school district. The nature of the autobiography assignment facilitated teachers' thinking about their own culture and the experiences that shaped their identities. Such reflection enabled teachers to give thoughtful explanations about exactly how they understood themselves as privileged rather than simply making broad statements or assumptions about the different levels of privilege.

Teachers Positioned Themselves as Aligned with/Similar to their Students

In the current research, teachers, through written autobiography, identified aspects of their personal lives that have influenced their professional identity as teachers. They wrote of situations where they could draw parallels to the feelings their students might be experiencing and similar aspects of their identities to reconcile the distance between cultures. The educational imagination thus served as a basis for empathy and familiarity.

The centrality of imagery and imagination in teacher's professional lives is well-documented (Greene, 1995; Kanno & Norton, 2003). Imagination is one of the three modes of belonging captured in Wenger's model of communities of practice, along with engagement and alignment (Wenger, 1998). Studies have demonstrated how imagination serves as a means to "connect with communities that lie beyond the local and immediate" (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 247). This latter concept is of importance to the teachers in this study, all of whom teach in rural settings, where resources may be limited or dispersed.

In some instances, teachers created feelings of identification by examining comparable experiences in their lives and imagining themselves in the place of their students. Brittany, for example, referred to the familiarity of being poor and its effect on how she views students with similar backgrounds: "I think this [growing up poor] has made me more empathetic to the low socioeconomic students in my classes and school." Jennifer, a pre-K teacher who earlier had identified herself as having a learning disability, wrote of relating to students who are academically challenged:

> I understood how lessons could be confusing and I was able to figure out different ways to teach them that made sense....Even from my first student teaching experiences, I was drawn to those who struggled. My heart went out to them because I completely understood.

For Jennifer, the theme of empathy was expressed as understanding what her students feel. Diana, an elementary school teacher, offered a

similar reflection on a past family move and the frequent migration of her current students. She wrote, "Going through such a big change helped us to grow closer together, and it helped me to be more understanding of the upheaval that many of my students regularly experience." Both of these teachers demonstrated the power of cultural autobiography; they voiced a connection to their students in specific ways when asked to reflect on their personal culture.

Consistent with the importance of family indicated in multiple autobiographies, teachers frequently drew a sense of familiarity and empathy from the real or imagined value systems of their families and communities. When reflecting on her culturally and linguistically diverse extended family, Brittany remarked, "How could I be racially or ethnically biased? When I look at the faces of the children I teach, they in some way remind me of someone in my family." Writing about her cultural autobiography allowed this teacher to articulate a connection to her students.

Teachers who were immigrants or second language learners themselves drew on these experiences to establish kinship with their students and describe the future they anticipate for their teaching. Yuliya, an ESL teacher, wrote how she immigrated to California from Mexico at age three and learned English at school while speaking Spanish at home. She described her hopes "that I take everything I have learned as a bilingual child, teen, and woman and try to instill some of my knowledge into the EL students I teach." Sophia also grew up in a Spanish-speaking household. She referred to her immigrant identity as being a strength that she holds, which allows her to show "empathy for others who are facing some of the same challenges I faced." By emphasizing their shared history, these teachers constructed an identity as a teacher with something to offer their ELs.

Teachers who identified as less culturally or linguistically diverse drew from their experience of travel to other countries and envisioned themselves as capable, responsive teachers. Frances, a Spanish teacher, wrote of using her experiences living overseas with her foreign-service father as a

means of empathizing with her students while also recognizing the limits of her comparison:

> Even though I do not know what it is like to be Black, Hispanic, Asian or another subgroup in America, I try hard to remember some of the prejudices that I myself experienced. I know it's not the same, and that there are so many invasive instances of white privilege in our society that exist, but I aspire to being a person who looks in the heart and soul of an individual before making a judgement.

Teachers with limited experience outside their rural settings were nonetheless able to make personal connections to the students they teach. Maureen, a high school art teacher, wrote:

> As a teacher, I do influence lives. What I didn't realize was how much teaching would influence me. The interactions that I have with such a diverse range of students are very meaningful to me. I have had the opportunity to gain insight into the experiences, successes and struggles of people from several cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Through a process of stressing the connections to their lives, teachers identified their purpose as one of mutual understanding and relationship building. Their students became familiar to them instead of the *other*. They could envision what they hold in common and position themselves as part of the same community.

There were also teachers who expressed the idea that they could embrace rather than bridge the differences between themselves and their students. Harriet, an elementary school teacher, made this distinction in her concluding discussion of the impact of writing a cultural autobiography.

> I enjoyed an upbringing that seemed free of racial strife but was in fact cocooned in a sameness that did not recognize the true diversity that abounded around me. I do still believe, as I did growing up, that people are inherently the same and should be treated with equal respect. But by viewing people as so similar, I think I have failed to appreciate that the beauty of people is in their differences.

Discussion

In this study, we asked how rural educators of ELs characterize their cultural position and the relationship between themselves and their students. As found by Chávez and others (2020), teachers uncovered connections between their personal histories and the pedagogical principles that shape their teaching through composing written narratives. Teachers became aware of their own educational "purposes and motives" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010) and could hear their own truths. They (re)constructed their cultural identities and, in doing so, gave new meaning to past influences on present and future teaching. Our findings demonstrated that teachers took up various social identifiers in describing their own culture. They used these cultural understandings to position themselves and their students to create productive communities.

As expressed in their autobiographies, teachers constructed their cultural narratives in terms of social identifiers, with religion/faith holding a strong place. Other studies have similarly noted religion or faith as a core value among rural teachers (Stephens, 2019). How teachers wrote of race seemed to be associated with their own racial identity. Teachers who self-identified as White either did not write of race, referenced their race implicitly by contrasting it with other racial categories, or wrote of race as something they could not understand or experience. Teachers who identified as nonwhite, however, included stories of social injustices and exclusion.

Teachers also emphasized family and the value of hard work as critical components of their culture, often narrating their family histories through an optimistic lens. They used these positive reflections to position themselves as privileged in relation to the students they teach, privileged in terms of finances, family role models, or school and home congruence. The focus on hard work represented in the narratives suggests that teachers held fast to a belief in meritocracy and did not recognize, or at least minimized, the role that their skin color or social position may have played in the privileges they enjoyed. Many teacher narratives exhibit a colorblind philosophy or one that advocates we ignore race and dismisses the role that social institutions have played in perpetuating racial inequality. The benefits teachers received as children were often the same circumstances that disenfranchised others, but teachers shied away from acknowledging these uncomfortable truths. For teachers in our study, perhaps colorblind perspective made considerations of social imbalances easy to discuss. Therefore, while teachers acknowledged the privileges they had in contrast to their students in their positioning, they tended to attribute these privileges to family values rather than the community social identifiers we asked them to consider in the prompt (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity).

An avoidance to articulate the difficult truths of social inequality does not mean that teachers were unable to recognize their students as individuals of worth. Rather, these autobiographies demonstrated that teachers used their particular histories and cultural understandings to position themselves and their students, even when they did not share a racial or linguistic background with each other. One of the indicators of culturally relevant teaching captured by Ladson-Billings (1994) is to see yourself as part of a community that includes your students. We found that teachers positioned themselves as similar to their students, imagining ways that aspects of their personal culture aligned with those of their students. Imagination allowed teachers to cross boundaries to create communities in which they shared experiences and cultural aspects with their students. They drew from their histories to empathize with their students, sometimes positioning their students as like them in one or more ways. These imagined communities, we suggest, contribute to teaching that is responsive to ELs. Rural teachers, more so than teachers in other settings, can be isolated from professional colleagues and current research on EL-responsive instruction (Lee & Hawkins, 2015). A key strength of rural teachers though may be what Stephens (2019) found as an "ethic of care, community, and closeness" (p. 2059). Thoughtful autobiography holds promise in moving rural teachers of ELs, the majority of whom do not share the racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds of their students, toward teaching that is fundamentally different.

Researchers have established a connection between "imagining the world as different from prevailing realities" (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 248) and developing the agency necessary to shape our future selves (Wenger, 1998). This agency takes shape in teachers' reflexive positioning and their interactive positioning of ELs. That is, they chose to take up roles that empowered them to approach teaching from culturally based perspectives rather than the norms and policies of rural districts that were new to serving ELs. While teachers did not use the term *agency* directly, multiple teachers' statements suggested a similar faith in being able to construct a teacher identity positioned on the side of educational justice and possibility. This agency is "socioculturally mediated" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112); there is a tension between individual agency and the constraints of a given context (Benson, 2017). Imagination, too, is "related to social ideologies and hegemonies" (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 247). Many teachers in this study positioned themselves as culturally neutral or privileged, at times minimizing race, ethnicity, and other features of difference. We argue that teachers, in general, stopped short of Paris and Alim's (2014) culturally sustaining pedagogy in which educators not only acknowledge but also cultivate their students' evolving cultures and languages. However, similar to what Bersh (2018) found in her study of teacher autobiography, reflection on one's cultural identity moved teachers in the direction of cultural responsiveness. Possibly through "hopeful imagination," teachers pushed themselves to "make culturally appropriate and affirming interpretations of student difference" (Warren, 2013, p. 193). This sense of imagination is particularly encouraging for rural educators who have limited interactions with individuals outside their geographic community. As Ndura (2004) reasons, "each step in the right direction must be celebrated" (p. 15).

Conclusions

Teaching is an unpredictable and changing endeavor. Culture, likewise, is not fixed but responsive to new experiences and perspectives. This study of rural teachers of ELs deepening their cultural understanding via narrative contributes to research that is situated in these nonurbanized and nontraditional settings. Teacher cultural autobiographies are one way of asking the hard questions of our teaching field, questions of racial prejudice, cultural distance, and otherness. Paying attention to one's life through autobiographical writing can help break taken-for-granted patterns in a way that may not occur through classroom discussion alone.

Limitations of the study include those imposed by the constraints of the course. Assignment instructions framed teacher discussions in particular ways that might not occur in the absence of those instructions. Further, we did not analyze the narratives by social identifiers and instead counted instances of themes by teachers as a whole to ensure confidentiality. Future studies might take these limitations into account.

Nonetheless, this study holds significance for autobiographical writing as it relates to rural teachers of ELs, a topic that has not been given a great deal of attention. Autobiographical writing serves multiple purposes. In this study, autobiography enabled teachers to narrate their cultural truth; in doing so, teachers constructed identity, reflected on pedagogy, and communicated ideas of change. For this group of 40 rural teachers, cultural autobiographical writing helped them begin to make sense of their personal stories and professional identities while drawing on the cultural constructs of their past and present communities. Teachers constructed identities for themselves that were used in positioning themselves towards their students. They made the unfamiliar familiar. Autobiographical writing required teachers to reflect deeply on their histories and circumstances. The concept of culture was not easily integrated into the stories they had previously told themselves about their lives.

Whether rural educators see themselves as capable or incapable of teaching ELs is likely to influence their interactions with their students and the opportunities they provide for learning. Teachers were able to develop their capacity to reflect on the ways they position themselves towards their ELs, a crucial first step in creating culturally sustaining pedagogy. Future work is needed to examine the extent to which teachers change their classroom beliefs, dispositions, or

instructional practices based on the experience of writing a reflective cultural autobiography.

Teacher education and professional learning for rural teachers of ELs might begin with autobiography and then help teachers connect their experiences with the behaviors they enact in the classroom with ELs. By starting with their own lives, rural teachers who are new to working with ELs might find unexpected ways they can relate to new populations of students. While we do not disagree with calls to diversify the teaching force so that educators resemble more closely their students in terms of the common social identifiers we use, our work suggests the potential for all teachers, regardless of background, to position themselves as aligned with their students based on similarities and create imagined communities between themselves and their students. This work is important for teachers across settings, but it is particularly timely for rural teachers in U.S. schools who are experiencing ELs for the first time in their classrooms.

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Appendix

Prompt for Cultural Autobiography Assignment

The cultural autobiography assignment is an exploration of your personal history, including the development of your cultural beliefs and perspectives. The assumption underlying this assignment is that our experiences and perspectives are the lens through which we view the world. Think about the stories that might help reveal your understanding of your culture to others.

Community: What are the disability, ethnic, gender, linguistic, racial, religious, socioeconomic or other affiliations that have been a part of your life, and influenced who you are?

Interactions: Who are the family, friends, and others who have influenced you most? In what ways have they affected your life and teaching? What was your first experience with diversity? Describe an experience where you had a newfound understanding of another's culture. What caused this new understanding to occur?

Individual: Describe your own development as a person in terms of values and behaviors. What are your strengths, challenges, learning preferences, personality traits? In what ways might these have been influenced by disability, ethnicity, gender, language, race, religion, socioeconomic status?