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Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World

Reviewed by: Melissa L. Gibson

Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Title: Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World

Author(s): Django Paris & H. Samy Alim

Publisher: Teachers College Press, New York

ISBN: 0807758337, **Pages:** 304, **Year:** 2017

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Culture, Gloria Ladson-Billings explains in this volume as elsewhere (e.g., 2006), is one of the most misunderstood ideas in education. Too often, culture is invoked to stereotype ethnic “others,” to justify white supremacy, or to avoid discussion of race and racism. Rather than understand culture in the anthropological sense, which “involves every aspect of the human endeavor” (p. 143), including ways of thinking, value and belief systems, and relationship norms, too many educators have reduced culture to a performance of food, fairs, and festivals. She is not alone in these concerns. For example, multicultural critic Paul Gorski (2016) has vehemently argued that the “cult of culture” (p. 222) in education interferes with true equity work.

Django Paris & H. Samy Alim’s edited volume, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching & Learning for Justice in a Changing World*, powerfully contests these misappropriations of culture in education. Instead, the essays in their book argue that culturally sustaining pedagogies, when rooted in an understanding of culture as dynamic, are foundational to achieving educational justice.

State-sanctioned schooling in the U.S. has always had a cultural purpose: at best, instilling a culture of democracy (e.g., Gutmann, 1987), and at worst, assimilating diverse students into a dominant culture of white supremacy (e.g., Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Given this history, Paris & Alim ask in their introduction, “What is the purpose of schooling *in pluralistic societies?*” (p. 1). One of their core assumptions, supported by their research on Hip-Hop, is that culture is at the heart of how communities of color resist white supremacy. Given that, culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP) seek “to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (p. 1). Rather than advocate specific instructional practices, CSP raises “fundamental questions about teaching and learning” (p. 2), such as how to shift the culture of power within education and how to sustain the cultural ways of being of communities of color. These fundamental questions are explored in the book’s two sections.

Part One, “Enacting Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies,” offers theoretically grounded cases of CSP. The first three chapters explore the importance of language to youth’s identities. By sustaining linguistic and cultural expressions that are usually excluded from the classroom—such as African American Language (Chapter Two; Valerie Kinloch), Spanish/English translanguaging (Chapter Three; Mary Bucholz, Dolores Inés Casillas & Jin Sook Lee), and indigenous language practices (Chapter Four; Tiffany Lee & Teresa McCarthy)—these authors argue that educators are not simply building a bridge to dominant institutions but rather inviting students to *challenge* the structural inequality of those institutions, ultimately transforming youth’s relationship with schools by encouraging educational self-determination.

The next three chapters explore how CSP cultivates youth’s educational agency. When youth of color are engaged as partners in their own education (Chapter Five; Jason Irizarry), when they are given the opportunity to see themselves in curriculum (Chapter Six; Timothy San Pedro), and when they are invited to co-construct learning spaces that reflect what matters to them (Chapter Seven; Casey Wong & Courtney Peña), youth are able to deepen their cultural identities and derive soul-sustenance to engage critically with schooling. Ultimately, as Wong & Peña state, CSP “moves beyond sustaining languages and cultures to sustaining the *people* who speak and enact those languages and cultures” (p. 130; emphasis added).

Part Two, “Envisioning CSP Forward through Theories of Practice,” offers critical theorizations of culture and its role in learning. Ladson-Billings opens this section (Chapter Eight) by cautioning, “Far too many teachers are selecting the most trivial aspects of the culture in an attempt to entice students into learning some of the same old information they have been teaching for years” (p. 152). Instead, she argues that CSP, like culturally relevant pedagogy before it, is about fundamentally challenging dominant ideologies, such as the raciolinguistic ideologies that denigrate bilingual students and their skilled repertoire of language practices (Chapter 10; Jonathan Rosa & Nelson Flores). This is further illustrated by H. Samy Alim & Adam Haupt’s analysis (Chapter Nine) of how Hip-Hop creates space to challenge linguistic and cultural imperialism in the South African context. In contrast to dominant raciolinguistic ideologies, CSP cultivates cultural and linguistic flexibility, and youth themselves are sources of knowledge in that process—as Stacey Lee & Daniel Walsh (Chapter 11) demonstrate in their analysis of classrooms serving diverse immigrant students.

In the spirit of Paris & Alim’s “loving critiques” (p. 4) of earlier asset pedagogies, the final chapters raise their own ‘loving critiques’ of CSP. For example, Amanda Holmes & Norma Gonzalez (Chapter 12) ask critically, *What are we sustaining?* They caution educators against reifying youth culture. Yes, culture is evolving, but it is also *sustained* intergenerationally, through pedagogical relationships that pass on ways of being that are worth sustaining, such as the anti-colonial resistance embedded in indigenous elder pedagogies. Their concern is echoed by others in the volume who worry about the uncritical celebration of youth culture. Instead, they want to CSP help youth explore the troubling or oppressive norms within their own cultures (e.g., homophobia within Hip-Hop culture). However, this demands a sophisticated understanding of culture and its central role in human learning and development, which Kris Gutierrez & Patrick Johnson (Chapter 14) and Carol Lee (Chapter 15) argue is afforded by cultural-historical and ecological frameworks. These frameworks help make visible the ways that youth are constantly sampling from many repertoires of practice and the ways that culture is by nature hybrid, contextual, and always-in-the-making.

Finally, Michael Dominguez (Chapter 13) raises critical questions about CSP and teacher education, specifically, how CSP can occur in K–12 classrooms if teachers themselves have never participated in a decolonizing education. He argues that teacher education needs a paradigm shift from an emphasis on ‘methods’ to the cultivation of liberatory educators able to see students’ full humanity. And yet, a continuing refrain from teachers in relation to justice-oriented pedagogies is, *So what do I DO in my classroom?* While this kind of “methods fetish” (Bartolome, 1994) too often serves as a distraction from justice work, it does signal a continuing need to engage directly with white teachers and to document approaches that successfully help teachers unlearn the colonizing gaze of white supremacy.

To that end, one of the volume’s most important contributions is that it exposes the ways that dominant schooling is a cultural process reflecting the white gaze. The essays included have the potential to help educators see the white supremacy underlying much of educational practice, including ostensibly equity-oriented approaches such as those concerned with ‘gaps’ or even social justice teaching. In contrast, CSP is an education that is relational, creative, emotional, personal, and, what is too often forgotten: *joyful*.

Thus, taken as a whole, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies* not only contests the misappropriation of culture in education, but it also contests the idea that attention to culture obfuscates equity work in schools (e.g., Gorski, 2016). To the contrary, sustaining culture is the heart and soul of educational

justice, because culture is the heart and soul of what it means to be human. CSP moves marginalized youth from object to subject position through fundamentally humanizing approaches, approaches that stand in contrast to the embedded deficit lenses of the racial contract otherwise structuring schooling. “To sustain culture is to sustain the lives of those who enact it” (p. 55) — there can be no educational justice without it.

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