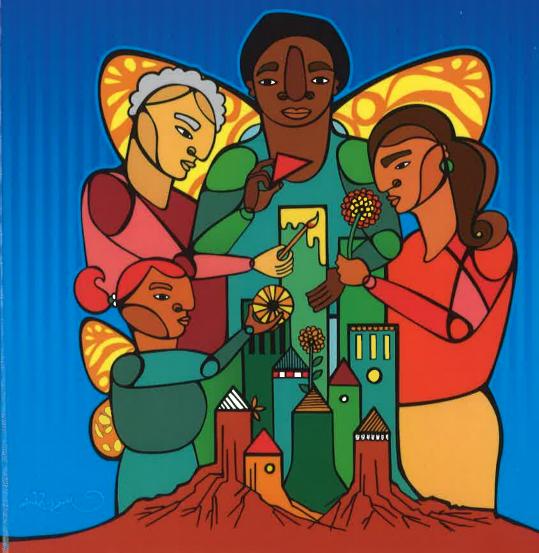# CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGIES

Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World

DJANGO PARIS • H. SAMY ALIM

EDITORS

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An Ecological Framework for Enacting Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

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Culturally sustaining pedagogy is a powerful next-generation articulation of the construct of culturally relevant pedagogy conceptualized by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995, 2001) over a decade ago. The original construct was warranted in response to the persistent educational "achievement gap" in the United States associated with race/ethnicity and class. Ladson-Billings (2006) appropriately reconceptualized the gap as the "education debt," documenting both the historical legacy of underresourcing schools for Black and Brown youth and youth living in poverty, and the economic and political debt that the country has accrued as a consequence of its policies. The argument was that teachers needed to design instruction in such a way as to build upon prior knowledge and experiences of youth and to emphasize building nurturing relationships with youth and their families. Paris (2012) and Alim (Alim & Paris, 2015; Paris & Alim, 2014) have expanded this warranting to argue that diverse funds of knowledge and culturally inherited ways of navigating the world need to be sustained as goods unto themselves. They further complicate our understandings of community cultural practices to include not only those historically connected to particular communities, but, equally important, contemporary youth culture, which typically spans across groups associated with race and ethnicity.

I enter this conversation to introduce additional warrants to support the argument about the centrality of culture in learning and instruction, and to hopefully expand the domains of development that are entailed in enacting and socializing cultural practices. I situate this argument from two theoretical orientations. The first is an ecological framework that views development of children and adults as situated within and across the demands of participation in the multiple routine sites of activity in which people are engaged (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In some respects, the historical

views of culturally relevant pedagogy and the more recent views of cultur-
ally sustaining pedagogy are rooted in an ecological frame, in the sense that
these constructs are asking teachers to take into account aspects of youths'
lives outside the classroom not only as resources, but as targets of learning
to be sustained. In my thinking about ecological framing, we need to take
into consideration both teachers' and children's lives outside of school (Ber-
nstein, 2014), as well as thinking of how classroom life is intersected with
school and district organizational practices as well as broader policy im-
plications that include multiple actors. This ecological framing views these
intersecting levels as dynamically interacting. More specifically, the Bron-
fenbrenner ecological framework considers the routine sites in which the
child participates; continuities and discontinuities across such sites; what
adults and other caregivers take from their routine sites of participation that
they then bring into the socialization of the child; then the broader institu-
tional configurations and ideologies that shape structures and policies in the
broader society; and, finally, the broader historical context.

The other framing I bring to bear is situated in the fields of human de-
velopment and cognition. I raise these framings because I think they open up
opportunities to view attention to culture in instruction and learning as fun-
damental to human growth and development (Lee, 2010), and not simply
as politically correct moves we want educators to make on behalf of Black
and Brown youth and youth living in poverty, suggesting that those who
are White and middle- or upper-class are just human, and that hegemonic
practices in schooling aimed at these youth are just normal, and that these
privileged groups are somehow both homogenous and not subject to vulner-
abilities. Indeed, as Margaret Beale Spencer (2006) asserts, to be human is
to be at risk. But at the same time, the nature of the vulnerabilities that hu-
man individuals and human communities face are clearly differentiated by
an array of societal positionings, particularly with regard to race, ethnicity,
class, gender, sexual orientation, and constructions of ability.

Charles Mills (1997) articulates what he calls *the racial contract*. Mills
draws on social contract theory—the idea that individuals give up individu-
al rights to enter into implicit social contracts to be governed in a collective
to achieve goods and protections that would be difficult to achieve simply
as individuals—but argues that Western world hegemony is built on a racial
contract (Kendi, 2016). The terms of this racial contract confer personhood
on those designated as White and non-personhood on Black and Brown
people; in other words, this is an ideology of White supremacy. In the Unit-
ed States and other former colonial nations in Europe, the terms of this
racial contract were explicit—witness the enslavement of Africans in North,
Central, and South America and the Caribbean and the genocide against
the Indigenous populations of these regions. However, today—for example,
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but implicitly engrained in a myriad of societal practices, including the ways in which inferior educational opportunities continue to be structured for schools serving majority Black and Brown populations and youth living in poverty. I raise this historic and ongoing ire of the ideology of White supremacy because I think it frames a web of normalized assumptions to which we are continuously having to argue against: to prove that Black and Brown communities have meaningful cultural practices; to prove that Black and Brown youth can learn; to prove that Black and Brown families are not characterized by deficit parenting practices, and so on. In many ways the normalizing assumptions today are not explicitly articulated in terms of race and ethnicity, but more so in terms of poverty. We see arguments about the culture of poverty (Jensen, 2009), how poverty affects the brain (Farah et al., 2006), how poor children come to school with insufficient language skills (Hart & Risley, 1995), how poor children lack executive functioning and executive control (Heckman, 2012), and how poor children need special development of what are now being called noncognitive skills (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001). From my perspective, these are all code for Black and Brown inferiority, articulating an unexamined set of assumptions about what it means to be middle-class, and inferring homogeneity to both the privileged and the disenfranchised.

I want to push against these implicit deficit codes by articulating an argument rooted in contemporary understandings of cognition, human development and the neurosciences, perhaps an ironic twist to the ways that pseudoscience was invoked to justify African enslavement (Gould, 1981). I hope this reimagining of the warrants to support arguments about the centrality of culture in human learning and development also open up new areas that I think a culturally sustaining pedagogy needs to address, as well as cautions to consider around how we conceptualize culture.

From a human development perspective, we know that identity is multi-faceted (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). There are issues of individual personal differences, of allegiances that emerge from participation in historically inherited practices associated with larger social configurations (e.g. ethnicity, nationality, religion), from patterned practices within families and family networks, from participating and viewing oneself as a member of particular groupings (e.g., a student, a lover of science, a gamer, a basketball player). Then there are aspects of identity that are influenced by how others see you, especially as these perceptions of others help to shape your opportunities to participate in particular practices and settings (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). These issues of how others perceive you become complicated in interesting ways for people whose patterns of practices are hybrid, crossing politically and socially salient communities (e.g., people who are biracial, more recent immigrants, transgender persons), and for persons whose public statuses are the subject of discriminatory belief systems (e.g., constructions of race, particular immigrant groups, those with physical disabilities,

the poor; Lee, 2009). Any of these dimensions of identity can be more or less salient in different contexts, and must be understood from a developmental perspective (e.g., how identity contingencies shift with across the life span; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990).

Building and sustaining a personal conception of positive identity is connected to how settings—including school—support positive physiological and psychological needs for safety, efficacy, relevance, and feeling connected through positive relationships (Maslow, 1943). And how such identity development unfolds over time is an outgrowth of the nature of sources of vulnerability that you face and the relationship between the kinds of supports that are available to you in response to the nature of the threats or sources of vulnerability. Spencer's (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 2006) PVEST framework (Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory) articulates these relationships, identifying how supports in relation to risks help to shape coping responses that become socialized over time in terms of more stable identities.

It is also important to recognize that how we perceive and experience the affordances and constraints in our environments influences and is influenced by physiological responses. For example, Adam (Adam et al., 2015) has documented how persistent experiences of discrimination can have negative health consequences (e.g., heart disease, diabetes, etc.), especially as these are experienced during adolescence. And it is equally important to recognize that our perceptions and responses to experience are embodied, are not merely psychological, but physiological as well. This also means that there can and are often features of contexts, of neighborhoods, for example, that can heighten negative physiological responses (e.g., food deserts, lack of green space, patterns of neighborhood violence that include both violence committed by members of a community against members of that community as well as violence perpetrated against members of communities by structures of the state) to sources of vulnerability. It is equally important, following the PVEST framework, to recognize (a) that objective conditions of challenge do not in themselves dictate how we experience these conditions and (b) that knowledge, beliefs, and relationships can buffer debilitating response to vulnerabilities (e.g., we see this in the resilience of generations of people of African descent to the horrors of enslavement).

From a cognitive perspective (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999), informed by an accumulation of evidence from the various fields of the neurosciences (cognitive, cultural, social) (Cacioppo, Visser, & Pickett, 2005; Neville & Bavelier, 2000; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007; Tomasello, 1999; Whitehead, 2010), we recognize that thinking, perceiving, and feeling are all intertwined; that regions of the brains do not operate in isolation; that the brain is fundamentally plastic over the life course (although some experiences heighten that plasticity); and that the working and development of physiological systems, including brain

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activity, are intimately intertwined with people's participation in cultural activities. We also know that human evolution has positioned the human species to survive by virtue of having multiple pathways through which to accomplish the fundamental tasks of navigating an ever-changing world—physically and psychologically (Lee, 2010; Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). All humans face the same challenges of establishing and sustaining relationships; of meeting ego-related needs for safety, efficacy, and relevance; of maintaining physical health; and of learning to adapt to change. However, the goals toward which we work to achieve these ends and the kinds of supports that are useful for accomplishing these aims differ substantively across cultural and historical communities. Thus, diversity is not just an ideological good, it is a necessity for survival—both at the level of individuals as well as groups.

So what are the implications for how we think about the demands and goals of culturally sustaining pedagogy? Further, how do we think about the knowledge demands and organizational demands of designing instruction that encompasses these multiple goals?

CORE CONSTRUCTS REVISITED (RACE, ETHNICITY, CULTURE)

The design of culturally sustaining pedagogical practices requires a critical examination of the constructs of culture, race, and ethnicity. These constructs must be critically examined because their normative and historical conceptions have been either informed by or responsive to what Mills (1997) calls the racial contract (Lee, 2009). This contract demarcates human family groups on the basis of physiognomy associated under this ideology with the construct of race. However, more recent research in the biological sciences documents that there are no significant genetic differences across the so-called races (Long & Kittles, 2009). And using skin color as a marker of race runs into conundrums (e.g., peoples of dark skin complexion in Africa, India, and Malaysia; of medium-brown or tan skin complexion from Spain and Italy; of light skin color from Europe as well as, for example the San people, the indigenous population of South Africa, or the Tuareg of Mali). Ultimately, race is a social and political construct and must be attended to as such. This is different from understanding race as a window into cultural communities. Ethnicity, on the other hand, refers to shared cultural practices that span across generations and are associated with both shared and distributed geographical space (Helms & Talleyrand, 1997). I indicate distributed geographical space because national boundaries change, and ethnic populations immigrate across national boundaries and carry with them cultural practices that often become hybridized as they adapt to the new nations. I will illustrate this idea in the case of people of African descent across the African diaspora (e.g. North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean).

The enslavement of Africans, or what many call the African Holocaust, forcibly stole peoples from West Africa to be dispersed as enslaved persons in North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean. Practices associated with their ethnic communities of origin—which would largely at that time have been constituted as nation-states (e.g. the Akan, Yoruba)—were forbidden under enslavement. However, in acts of historic and cultural resilience, African-descent communities in the West crafted ways to sustain practices and belief systems that were part of what Boykin (Boykin, Jagers, Ellison, & Albury, 1997) calls deep culture structures pervasive across West Africa. In some areas—particularly Brazil and Cuba—Yoruba practices were sustained in easily identifiable ways (Murphy, 1993). These West African cultural practices and belief systems that have sustained peoples of African descent as ethnic communities include commitments to extended family networks; particular structural and rhetorical features of language; a belief in relations between ancestors and the living; particular religious practices; and the salience of rhythm and the importance of the drum, among others. A number of anthropological, linguistic, psychological, and sociological studies have documented these ethnic practices (King, 1976; Nobles, 1974; Smitherman, 1977; Thompson, 1983; L. Turner, 1949; P. Turner, 1993; Vass, 1979; Wahlman, 2001; Williams, 1990). A focus on race does not include any attention to these ethnic practices and their historical evolution, nor the function these practices have and continue to play as sources of resilience in African descent ethnic communities (Hilliard, 1995).

Another complication to the construct of race emerges from how to categorize children born from parents of different "races." This conundrum raises the historic dilemmas in the United States around blood quantum, particularly in reference to people of African descent and Indigenous populations in the Americas. In South and Central America these dilemmas become particularly complex because of the longstanding intermixing of African, Indigenous, and European peoples in these regions (Wade, 2001).

I raise the issue of ethnic communities as a repository of historically intergenerational cultural practices for several reasons. First, I think this idea of intergenerational cultural practices offers an important warrant for the idea of culturally sustaining practices; that is, are there practices that communities have sustained over time (albeit in hybrid forms and transformations) that have sustained communities to be resilient in the face of challenge? For example, if particular cultural practices and belief systems allowed people of African descent in the United States and the diaspora to survive and thrive through enslavement and Jim Crow—America's two centuries of legal apartheid—then it seems reasonable that sustaining these practices and strategic transformations in response to changing conditions is a worthwhile goal. If belief systems and practices around relationships with the natural world among Indigenous populations in the Americas have allowed for ecological resilience (see the Menominee Nation in Wisconsin), then it seems reasonable that such practices should be sustained

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In these instances, membership in cultural communities, in this case defined by ethnicity, is defined by participation in practices, and not by race or skin color. Under this framing, people can self-identify as members of such communities, but there is also the question of being accepted by others in the community, by actually being able to participate in settings where the practices are central. For example, there are Yoruba priests and priestesses of European descent. This ultimately means that any cultural self-identification can be contested. And socializing students to understand such contestations as well as the affordances of sustaining particular practices, I think, should be a goal of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

A second important tenet regarding cultural membership is that people always belong to multiple cultural communities. Communities defined by ethnicity are just one source of community identification (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Others include metalevel communities associated with gender, sexual orientation, religion, age cohort, and profession, as well as special interest groups (e.g., video gamers, Hip Hop). Depending on the context, one or more of these identity markers may be more salient or not. As a consequence, any theorizing around culturally sustaining pedagogy needs to conceptualize the multiple cultural communities with which students may identify, and figuring out which of these community identifications and their attendant resources may be most useful for particular targets of development that the pedagogy hopes to foster. Expanding our understandings of cultural repertoires has been an explicit focus of the conceptualization of CSP by Paris and Alim.

Paris and Alim (2014) offer exemplars of instantiations of Hip Hop culture as windows into the ways that the current youth generation, in particular, constructs hybrid practices that draw from across traditional ethnic communities (Alim, Ibrahim, & Pennycook, 2008). They argue that these hybrid practices represent emerging demographic changes in the United States and, as a consequence, embody the breadth of resources on which a culturally sustaining pedagogy can draw. They also argue, consistent with traditional conceptualizations of culturally responsive instruction, that our goals should move beyond simply helping Black and Brown students and students in poverty access what can be called Dominant Academic American English and Eurocentric assimilationist goals. While I fundamentally agree with both of these propositions, I want to offer a related set of considerations.

As I indicated earlier, this tradition of scholarship must wrestle with the constraints of responding to the deficit tenets of the racial contract. The interdependence across communities and constructions of hybrid practices simply is what human communities do. The idea that there is a homogenous White, middle-class culture is a myth, a myth that has been idealized in an array of norms by which schools and children are evaluated. The idea that there is a homogenous standard of what it means to be an American is a

myth. The idea that there is a singular dominant academic English is also a myth. Languages evolve. "American English" continues to be fundamentally shaped by multiple linguistic traditions: new words and syntactic forms, new genres. American popular culture—music, dance, media—has always evolved from diverse cultural traditions. As literacy scholars, we know that, for example, American literature is inherently diverse and hybrid. For example, the genre of magical realism includes Toni Morrison and William Faulkner, Amos Tutuola and Gabriel García Márquez, who said he didn't realize he could write down the kinds of stories his African-descent grandmother told until he read the German Jewish writer Franz Kafka. There is no academic domain that we teach in schools that is not influenced by contributions and practices from across historical and diverse cultural ethnic communities. And the new knowledge that evolves is hybrid. Understanding the hybridity of the undergirdings of disciplinary knowledge, understanding such knowledge as social constructions whose explanatory power evolves with time, should be a goal of CSP for all students. This is a revolutionary set of assumptions, but ones that are in some instances embraced and in other instances ignored or contested in the academy. For example, linguists certainly understand the hybrid influences on the development of American Englishes (we do speak different regional dialects of American English), but K–12 education does not. Literary critics in the academy (albeit distributed quite unequally across English departments in the academy) recognize the interconnections among Morrison, Faulkner, Márquez, and Kafka, but literature instruction in K–12 education clearly does not.

While not explicitly addressed, another conundrum that scholars of CSP must wrestle with is the dilemma of the traditional and modernity (Zakaria, 2008). This is a question for communities and for scholars. In some respects, W. E. B. Du Bois (1903, 1973) raised this dilemma when he described what he called double-consciousness among African Americans (wrestling with being Black and being American), and later the challenge that advances in integration should not mean that African Americans need to give up on their Blackness. This is a dilemma across the globe. There is no simple resolution to this question. However, raising and wrestling with it is a necessary first step. As we think about what should be sustained and why, we must realize that there are always competing demands around what is historically transmitted as tradition, and new practices and allegiances that are often hybrid and emergent. And this dilemma is certainly one about which scholars and practitioners of CSP must think. In some ways, Paris and Alim's (2014) caution about the need to interrogate some of the homophobic, racist, and misogynistic practices in current Hip Hop artifacts and practices is another lens on the kinds of dilemmas that this problem space invites and the critical engagement that it requires.

So, from my perspective, these foundational propositions require attention to the following questions:

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- How and why do we seek to understand the multiple cultural communities with which students identify?
- In particular, for students who are members of communities that are politically marginalized, what functions can attention to historically intergenerational cultural practices (often associated with ethnicity) serve in terms of supporting positive identities, resilience, and critical analyses of institutional policies and practices that serve as sources of disenfranchisement?
- Toward what goals should culturally sustaining pedagogy strive?
- For all students, how does attention to examining how historic and contemporary institutional structures and policies function to maintain stereotypes serve the broader public good in a democracy? Attention to the broader public good in a democracy may provide leverage, for those whose positionings are sustained through hegemonic ideologies may be able to see how such ideologies actually work against the public good and constrain their own development.
- For all students, how can examinations of the hybrid and diverse underpinnings of traditional academic domains help to shape how students understand knowledge production?

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

I want to build on the goals for CSP as articulated by Paris and Alim by revisiting my earlier discussion of the multidimensional nature of human learning. No matter the goals for instruction, there are fundamental supports that need to be available. Instruction needs to support students in feeling efficacious, in seeing the relevance of targets of learning and of developing relationships that build a sense of belonging, and in socializing beliefs in the power of effort. It is possible that supports from outside of school, for example, from parents, can help students buffer the challenges that can arise when classroom instruction does not build these competencies. When the challenges that you are navigating are in tension with the expectations of schooling, managing these discontinuities is all the more difficult. A goal in CSP is to minimize these discontinuities in the contexts of schooling. And from both the CRP and CSP traditions, the goal is to minimize these discontinuities and to not view them as based on presumed deficits in communities and family life. My point here is that robust learning environments must address goals beyond cognitive skills alone (e.g., learning content that is presumed to be culturally relevant for some set of goals). The issue of supporting students in feeling efficacious and seeing the relevance of learning targets needs to draw from extant research on how people learn: the importance of drawing on relevant prior knowledge, of making problem solving public and explicit; the need to address generative concepts and to socialize

epistemologies, to facilitate dialogue and metacognition; and opportunities to interrogate multiple points of view and misconceptions. The idea of generativity pushes against simplistic and restrictive content and requires that we teach knowledge, skills, epistemologies, and dispositions that can serve as problem-solving resources for a wide array of problems within domains as well as across domains and tasks. These domains and tasks—both within and across domains—can include not only what we think of as academic skills (which, as you will recall, I do not hand over solely to Eurocentric origins), but equally the problems of sustaining a democracy, resisting stereotypes, engaging in activism for that which is just, and learning to be resilient in the face of changing and evolving sources of threat.

Indeed, these are herculean tasks of teaching (whether as parents, as teachers, as mentors, or as coaches) and require ongoing lifelong commitment to learning and inquiry. This, among the challenges of instantiating CSP (and CRP), particularly in schools, requires significant infrastructure (e.g., what we do in teacher education, the requirements of licensing, supports for professional development within schools as learning organizations, curriculum, assessments, a diverse array of supports within schools and communities). It means, then, that those of us who are committed to these kinds of asset-based pedagogies must form alliances, must ourselves be producers, must put ourselves on the line in terms of participating in practice on the ground.

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