

Conceptualizing “Culture” in Relevant and/or Sustaining Pedagogy: Questions for Teachers

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Issue

In his essay, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice*, Django Paris (2012) takes up Ladson-Billings’ (1995) term “culturally relevant” pedagogy and argues that while it has inspired his own personal teaching practice as well as those of countless others, he finds that it does not go far enough in describing the conditions upon which systematic inequalities have marginalized some communities’ languages and cultural practices. He suggests the term “culturally sustaining” pedagogy instead, because it incorporates the best research and practices in the tradition of the abundance model (Moll, 1990), as opposed to the deficit model of teaching (Valencia, 1997), while foregrounding the multiethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity that fosters pluralistic democratic schooling.

Ladson-Billings (2014) herself recently published an article, responding to Paris in a positive and welcoming way. She reaffirms the fluidity of the term and the changing times it speaks to, especially insofar as it continues to push teachers’ critical thinking of and about differing cultural landscapes that come together in a classroom context.

However, the question remains as to what extent *in practice* the new “culturally sustaining” marker differs from or enhances the way researchers conduct studies that draw on Ladson-Billings’ original “culturally relevant” paradigm.

Furthermore, what does this change in terminology mean for teachers who serve in contexts of culturally diverse communities?

In this paper I argue that, while in theory Paris’ reconceptualization of the term has potential to invigorate research and studies that seek to make beneficial contributions to the way in which children in diverse communities learn, in practice, the implications for its use, in communities where “culture” is not a fixed entity but a much more dynamic concept, make for complicated implementation. I conclude by discussing ways in which teachers might navigate the terrain of culturally responsive/sustaining pedagogy in order to foster inclusivity in their classrooms.

Conceptualizing Culture

A Detailed Interpretation

Prior to its theorization in the 1960s and 1970s, to be cultured was to be in an aesthetic realm of having a particular taste for certain artistic modes and productions. Anthropologists were first on hand to describe the way in which cultures might be thought of, broadly speaking, as ways of living and social expressions. Geertz (1973) argued that ethnographers must incorporate “thick description” into their accounts of cultures under study by delving into the details and the conceptual structures and meanings of said cultures, in order to thoroughly and intricately interpret the ways their peoples are being in the

world. For Geertz, interpretive studies should trace the manner in which meanings are culturally ascribed and the ethnographer’s interpretation of data collected should involve the expressions of culture that only local informants can provide.

If teachers in diverse communities can learn something from the Geertzian mode of ethnography, it is that seeking to understand the dynamics of culture in the classroom should be a process that involves local community participants. Teachers cannot on their own (in the absence of dialogical exchange with their students and other stakeholders) come to the conclusion that: “This is what I think the particular culture of said participants entails, and so, in keeping with idea of culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy, this is how I will incorporate it into my pedagogical practices.”

Culture is ‘Fluid’

How might teachers begin to understand the composition of something as fluid and in constant flux, as what is encompassed when we speak of “culture”? For instance, Crane (1994) calls culture a “social construct” as opposed to an objective reality. Bourdieu (1991) argues that culture is not only the mediating factor which connects individual agency with systematic structures but it is also the way in which hegemonic classes maintain their hierarchal dominance over others in a society. For Stuart Hall (1997), culture is a practice of producing and exchanging meanings.

Theories abound that offer multiple ways of conceptualizing culture and it is upon teachers to recognize that if, in their classrooms, culture is meant to encompass ways of knowing others and is to be utilized as a resource, then it should foster in teachers the practice of being open to the role it plays in the everyday experiences of their students. *Being open* does not refer to the connotation surrounding notions of tolerance, rather, being open tries to capture the idea of allowing for culture to manifest in ways that may not be entirely what a teacher envisions in relation to her or his own ideas of what she thinks is meant by culture. Culturally responsive/sustaining pedagogy is not simply about fostering

traditional notions of cultural diversity. It requires an approach that is situated in conditions of instability. It calls on teachers to be practitioners of an ethical mode of alterity (Levinas, 1999): one that requires respect for the complexities of and conversations about the various ways culture *lives* (Van Manen, 1990) in their students.

From Research to Classroom Practices

An initial literature review carried out on the studies conducted after Paris’ (2012) reconceptualization of “culturally relevant” to “culturally sustaining” indicates to me that teacher-researchers tend not to engage with the new term in meaningfully, rigorous ways—at least not in an empirically documented sense—and instead, only make brief acknowledgements of it. Additionally, if the objective of this type of teaching is, as Ladson-Billings (1994) states, to “empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes,” (p. 17-18), then teachers need to see how researchers are implementing it to achieve these objectives. Our task, as researchers hoping to help teachers in their classroom practices, is to ask what makes a cultural mode or artifact “sustaining” if the very culture in which it is born and fostered is ever-shifting (Bhabha, 1994) and if its movement is not entirely understood by educators.

Educators and researchers can move forward by asking key questions. We can ask ourselves how we might engage students in conversations about the role of culture in their lives. If we have trouble defining the term, we might ask students “How would you define culture?” We might reflect upon what we think we already know about the cultural exchanges happening between ourselves and our students. Are these exchanges based on our assumptions about students’ cultural backgrounds or are they based on our actual exchanges with students? We might additionally think about how to best support students while integrating culture with curricula. What might a best practices policy look like?

As educators or researchers, we cannot presume that this task will be a simple one. The

complications of attempting to categorically define culture means that culturally relevant or sustaining pedagogy must intrinsically be embraced for its *non*-simplicity. If culture is to be understood in its “thickness” or the way in which it is conceived in schools—to disrupt notions of class hierarchal advantages through diversity or multicultural policies—then we should also consider that the cultural communities which are “relevant” to student identities are not simple, fixed entities presumed to have “sustaining” capabilities. If we are to meaningfully engage with the sort of relevant/sustaining work that Ladson-Billings (1995) and Paris (2012) call for, then we must also probe, in a dialogical mode of inquiry, the nuanced ways in which our students internalize and “do” culture today.

Author Biography

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