

Podcast Transcript:

What does Culturally Sustaining instruction look like in the classroom?

<http://www.bamradionetwork.com/classroom-q-and-a/3881-the-look-and-feel-of-culturally-responsive-instruction>

Django Paris What we're talking about is something very different and that is of course is where students are centered across academic activities and that doesn't mean it's not critical and that doesn't also mean that they don't extend what they know and can do.

record scratch

Larry Ferlazzo What are the challenges that you see teachers facing in implementing this kind of culturally sustaining pedagogy in the classroom?

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Welcome to Classroom Q & A. This is Larry Ferlazzo. Race and culture are critical issues facing society, teachers, and our students.

How do we approach it in a respectful, acknowledging, and enriching way? Culturally sustaining instruction is one strategy to do just that. And Django Paris joins me today to discuss it. He along with Travis Bristol have also guest hosted a two-part series in my Education Week teacher column on the topic. Welcome Django. And we'll go more in-depth into it as the show goes on. But could you begin by giving me a brief definition of what culturally sustaining instruction is?

Django Paris Yeah sure. So culturally sustaining instruction or culturally sustaining pedagogy talks about teaching and learning that seeks to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. And as a necessary response to demographic and social change. And so, it's an outcome oriented approach, right, or stance to teaching and learning where we want to think about pluralism not just on the way into educational settings. So not simply honoring or being responsive to the language, literacies, and cultural ways that young people bring into classrooms, but actually classrooms as places that perpetuate and foster those, where they deepen and extend the practices and ways that young people bring to classrooms.

Larry Ferlazzo What are some practical examples of culturally sustaining instruction in the classroom?

Django Paris There are many.

But one of the things that I think educators need to ask when they're thinking about taking on or enacting a culturally sustaining approach is what is it that they're seeking to sustain through classroom learning. Right. And so that puts the burden on young people, on educators, on families, on schools to think about what are the valued practices, languages, literacies, cultural ways of young people. Some of the really extraordinary examples of what I would call culturally sustaining pedagogy have been some of the recent successes -- and long term -- but really recent successes in ethnic studies. So, when you look at places like San Francisco Unified which now has ethnic studies for all or Tucson Unified School District which for a long time had a very successful Mexican-American studies program. These were programs in which teachers centered the histories, the literatures, the literacies.

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Some of the valued and cherished ways of Mexican-American, Latina Latino students, of African-American students, Pacific Islander students, of Native students, Indigenous students, Asian, Asian-American students where languages, literacies, cultural ways were centered in classroom learning through study and what we know about those contexts is that students not only do better in the very classes where they are centered but they end up doing better across subject areas when they feel valued in school spaces, when they feel like what they know and care about is a meaningful part of classroom learning.

Larry Ferlazzo You know and I know, I mean, recently there have been some study that came out in which it highlighted the value of that for all students. So, it's really more of a proactive approach and making it into the center -- we're not talking about doing something at the edges but making it the center of instruction. Is that accurate?

Django Paris Right. So, we have to think about this in the context of a changing nation. Right? So, in 1970, 80 percent of public school students are white. Today over 50 percent are students of color, right, and that's only going to accelerate and shift further. And yet schooling -- US public schooling continues to be centered really in monocultural and monolingual norms of being but also of achievement in the way achievement is measured. And those are -- those norms are really centered around things and practices that are common in white middle class communities. You know again monolingual communities and not centered in a multi-lingual reality for so many young people now going forward. And so, I think one of the things we have to think about is for too long, approaches to what's been called multicultural education sometimes and/or sometimes ethnic studies, sometimes culturally relevant pedagogy, and I don't think that many of these approaches were actually doing any of those. And for too long, it's been exactly what you said Larry, and that is inviting some literature or some history or maybe student language or community practice into the classroom only to get toward the better practices in a better language with a better literacy or a better literature or the more accurate history. What we're talking about is something very different and that is courses where students are centered across academic activities. And that doesn't mean it's uncritical and that doesn't also mean that they don't extend what they know and can do. But it does mean that the outcome is that they still have those practices intact and hopefully they know them in ever more critical ways.

Larry Ferlazzo What are the challenges that you see teachers facing in implementing this kind of culturally sustaining pedagogy in the classroom and what are your suggestions for how those obstacles could be overcome?

Django Paris One of the challenges, you know -- and as you and I both know that's -- having been a classroom teacher in different contexts myself for many years -- a lot of this depends on school context, district context, state context, etc. But one of the challenges is that, by and large, policies and the practices that often are associated with educational policies forward much of what I'm talking about where a particular, you know, monolingual, monocultural outcomes are what are valued. One thing that the ethnic studies research that you were talking about, that some of the contexts that have enacted culturally sustaining pedagogy well have shown -- and this isn't a surprise to many -- but that students can do well on those, you

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know, those standard or standardized measures of success and often do much better at them when they're involved in this sort of pedagogy. But that's not the sole measure. So, I think what sometimes looks like a challenge or a barrier in fact is less of one than it might seem. I think another thing we have to think about is capacity. So not all of us as educators have been prepared, trained, and/or asked to, even if we might want to, right, to engage in this sort of work with young people, with the young people that, you know, that we're dedicated to teaching and so I think, you know, another challenge is how we can better prepare teachers as well as in terms of professional development and ongoing learning to value young people and I'm thinking here particularly about young people of color and what they bring into classroom learning and that's a long project that many have been involved in. And so how do we help teachers again know what it is that they -- communities, students, families -- might want to sustain and then work on getting there. So, I think you know those are a couple of challenges in terms of capacity of educators and also in terms of an educational system that for the most part you know for instance doesn't value, you know, bilingualism but rather thinks of a few classes of additional language education in high school as enough of an additional language. And so, you know, so many young people's families you know have ways with language, ways with literacy, ways with being in the world that can cross multiple boundaries and borderlands and yet education hasn't really found a good way to value that and that's some of the work that we're joining with many others and trying to do through culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Larry Ferlazzo We're running out of time only a few seconds left. What is one simple thing a teacher can do tomorrow to begin a journey towards culturally sustaining pedagogy?

Django Paris I think one thing a teacher can do is to think about who the students are in their classrooms and what language varieties and languages they use in their communities and at school. Right? And to start thinking about ways to bring those meaningfully into the classroom, to ask students about what it is they care about, and to rather than simply to think of bringing that into the classroom, think about joining it, right? What are young people doing in digital space? What are young people doing on mobile devices? What are young people doing with the languages that they use in their communities and why? Why not bring those into the classroom? So, it's really -- the start is an invitation.

Larry Ferlazzo Great. Well I'd like to thank Django Paris for joining me today in a conversation on a culturally sustaining instruction and culturally sustaining pedagogy. And you can see a two-part series he and Travis Bristol have organized and hosted on Education Week. Thanks again, Django. Thanks for listening to Classroom Q&A. I'm Larry Ferlazzo. This program is produced by a team with BAM! Radio Network.